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DUAL LIVES.

BY

J. C. Chillington.

"Our lives are interwoven here below,
frequently, indeed most frequently, with-
out our knowing it. We are in great part
moulded by unconscious interaction."

JOHN TYNDALL, F.R.S.



In Three Volumes.

Vol. II.

London:

Richard Bentley & Son,

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

1893.

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DUAL LIVES.

CHAPTER I.

THE CUP OF GRIEF.

AT the end of a long corridor built over the kitchen premises, in which the servants' rooms were placed, were one or two unoccupied and avoided apartments. In the furthest of these was a communication with the ruined wing, and from it a door led into the next chamber, which was large and lofty, and quaintly decorated. This room the housekeeper had requested permission to occupy ; her ostensible reason being that it was the best way to silence silly super-

stition, which had endowed these further portions of the corridor with restless and perturbed spirits. Not one of the servants would enter this particular room alone ; but strange to say, the housekeeper preferred it to any other, and it had become a recognized fact that, either the ghosts were afraid of her, or that in some way she was proof against them. Late events had drawn upon her condemnation, antipathy, and horror, mingled with fear ; and since her self-exaltation to a high place, she had made herself pretty comfortable in this deserted corner, where she lived apart, levying such service as the fear of her, and the wish to be rid of her presence among them, could exact from the under-servants. It was to this place that she now retreated with her ill-gotten gain in her possession. She ensconced herself in a comfortable chair, and saying with a light laugh, "Now for a pretty romance," drew the book from her pocket, and began to peruse its contents.

On the first page was pinned that letter which had sung the psalm of deliverance in poor Stephen's ears, when the burden of his life was becoming very heavy and very painful. Certainly, at that time, he could never have believed it possible that Fate could have still sharper arrows in store! The journal itself had evidently been commenced shortly after the arrival at Long Dene. It was written at intervals, and was, throughout, a pitiful cry for merciful judgment from the wife he so dearly loved; an explanation of facts; and a medium whereby he eased his mind of its burden, and tried, in argument with himself, to arrive at some just and fair conclusions as to his present position and action, in his difficult circumstances. He explained particularly the events of that day when, on their homeward road, he had fainted and fallen in his room, and quoted, as accurately as his memory would permit, the letter that had produced this effect. The document itself he had torn

in pieces and scattered to the four winds of heaven in his rage.

“It was brutally harsh and cruel, and I thanked God for that—there was no pretence of softness about it. It was a demand for money—a very large sum of money—as well as shelter and maintenance for a fixed period, with the alternative threat of disclosing everything to you. Darling, *believe me*—most likely when you read these words I shall have ceased to heed praise or blame—the sole motive, that holds me on this fearful course, is the wish to save you from suffering while I may. I was going to say, I *would*; but that is a needless assertion, and you will know and remember, in looking back into this past time, that I *do*—oh, merciful God!—I do suffer more than the flames lost spirits endure, and I cannot see the way out of it. When the time is up, and I have collected the money she requires, she will go, and then——

“Darling the sorrowful question is in your

eyes to-day. It maddens me to think that this fiendish shadow is between us. It maddens me to know that she breathes the same air as you do, and has the same roof above her head. What can I do? How can I prevent it? I have only spoken to her twice since she came—I said, ‘On my honour, the money shall reach you all the same—could you not live elsewhere? Have you no womanly gentleness in your nature?’ It was wasting words. Her levity, her utter indifference to her crime and its results, prove her to be so hardened that nothing can melt her to a better mood. Sometimes I am sorely tempted to rid the world of such a being. The other day I walked round under the place where her room is, and wondered how I could manage it. When I pay her the large sum, I meet her in the ruins—we are alone—what should hinder me from carrying a knife in one hand, and the gold in another? What? My love for you, Letty; my love for you! In this world I

am the most miserable of men ; in the next I must try to meet you again.

“ Sometimes, in my imaginings, I tell you all. I try to hear, to think I hear, what you answer ; but a black darkness falls over my mind, and I can think no more. How I wish poor Ashley were alive ! Once he would have saved me, and I would not heed—and now even Ashley could bring no shelter from the devastating blast that has fallen on our lives. Shall I ever tell you ? Even when she goes ? Shall I end my life and leave you only its miserable story ? But they say the suicide is accursed, and perhaps I might never, never meet you again. Oh, my Letty, I will not say forgive—that is so hard—that I have *done* nothing ; only I am—there is no word that can express it, that can take in the miserable length and breadth and depth of what I am.

“ The proudest and happiest husband in the universe could not more tenderly guard the woman he loves from the approach of any

evil thing, and yet I have to endure the knowledge that you see *her* every day. I would send you away if I could, but I am afraid—afraid of that fiend in human form. ‘God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in time of trouble.’ Oh, Letty, is it true? Is anything true? Why have I no refuge, no strength, no help in my trouble? That which I have done—unknowingly—is that I would have perilled my soul to avoid. There is nothing, nothing on earth or in heaven to help me.

“I have had a sealed paper from her with these words, ‘Danger threatens you. Come to-morrow, early; I will put you on your guard.’

“What can it mean? The hateful time is so nearly over—in a few weeks more she will have gone. Is some new torture preparing for me? As Thou art a God of mercy let it be *me*—only for me. Spare the innocent. I will live my miserable life with gladness, only to keep *her* from this pit of despair.”

“Idiot!” She flung the book upon her table. “Very uncomplimentary, and not a bit amusing. The only bit of real tragedy is my own letter, and that brings tears to my eyes. I’ll send the rubbish to Matt all the same. He’ll see what a good little girl I am.”





CHAPTER II.

AN INTERLUDE.

ABOUT this time in our century, discontent and questionings, to which our simple forefathers were strangers, had begun to manifest themselves. Trades unions had taken up their positions, and though tramps had not developed into professionals, there were idle ill-favoured fellows now and then, refusing honest employment, and roving about with their hands in their pockets and imaginary grievances in their minds, taking of charity or good nature the supply of their daily needs, for which they had not the manhood to give an equivalent.

One of these “ne’er-do-weels” had been

lingering about the kitchen premises that afternoon at Long Dene, and as the greatest villains are often most successful in cajoling the softer sex, and as the gentle mistress of Long Dene had always willed that the hungry should never be sent away empty, so Polly the kitchenmaid had provided an afternoon refreshment, in the wood-house beyond the scullery door.

It was a wild and gusty day ; the clouds were scudding swiftly across the sky, and nature seemed to have hired all hands to blow away the fading remains of a dead summer.

The girl went to fetch the platter on which she had carried out an ample meal ; as she left him, the man, rising lazily to take his departure, and repaying her with some saucy and alluring compliment after his kind, asked "the nearest way to the coach-road to Wetherbury."

"You'll find a path to the right," she said, "up the hill under the trees ; but

doan't 'ee take left hand in mistake, for they ghosties do walk there."

He laughed and went.

Past the outhouse buildings, where nothing seemed stirring, down by the outer garden-wall he sauntered. There was a fire burning in the coachman's cottage, and through the open door he heard the happy sound of children's voices. The demon of unreasoning discontent rose within him; he turned and looked back at the pile of buildings he had left, and muttered an unholy word or two in reference to any one, and every one, wiser or better than himself and his confrères. The clerk of the weather was in a mood surly as his own, and seeing the darkling storm-clouds overhead, he thought it would be wiser to pursue his quest of the high-road. Walking some way to the higher ground, he came upon the margin of the old wood that sloped up the north-east side of Long Dene park.

According to the girl's instructions, he

followed the path before him; but about a hundred yards from the edge of the wood the pathway narrowed and separated into two branches, one to the right still going up the hill, the other to the left turned backward towards the house, but seemed to run pretty level through the wood.

Here he halted and bestowed some more eloquent epithets on "the ghosties." "I bean't afeared," he said. And then, because it was his nature to do one thing when counselled to do another, he turned to the left and slouched along that path.

Great old trees that must have been well trimmed and watched over in their early youth, hundreds of years before, and have looked but sparsely scattered on the hillside in their slim young days, now stood strong and redundant, with spreading boughs that met and mingled overhead; while enormous trunks, rising from the mossy ground, sent out their gnarled and wrinkled roots in all directions, as though firmly anchoring in the soil.

“They be gert trees, surely,” he muttered; “a green parlour for milord and milady, and as good as golden walls to it I be bound.” He stepped back on the path, looked all round, curiously tapping here and there, and measuring with his greedy eye the probable value of one piece of their giant trunks. It was strangely quiet and sheltered; the wind above and below sounding with a distant roar, but not stirring a dead leaf on the spot where he stood. Standing in the cleft of a huge old monarch, that had been dis-crowned by some storm king of long ago, the wayfarer drew his pipe from his pocket, and sought as much consolation as the few pinches of loose tobacco he could gather together might afford. There he rested, seated on the ground, and leaning back into his comfortable corner, while the darkness of evening gathered overhead. He debated in his own mind whether it would not be politic, to save his drink and lodging that night by remaining where he was. He

jingled a few coppers in his pocket and looked upward, calculating the consequences of heavy rain. As he did so a sound struck upon his ear. He did not wish to be discovered and roughly handled, as would doubtless be the case if a keeper or underling were coming that way; so he stuck his thumb into his pipe to extinguish its glow, and standing up, straightened his dark form closely to the tree. The sound—a gentle creeping sound—was approaching from his right. He dared not turn his head, and it seemed an age of suspense, as it drew nearer, and yet nearer, and then, seeming to be on a line with where he stood, stopped suddenly, yet not completely. He felt rather than heard it, and, every nerve in his body on tension, he waited one long half-minute.

“Dom it,” he muttered to himself, “if I could only *see* what it wur.”

One long half-minute—while something, not like hearing, but *feeling*, a soft move-

ment, made his flesh creep. Then the sound seemed to possess the senseless tree-trunk where he stood—a grating and scraping sound at the back of his head, and soft regular breathing, as if some creature with sharp claws were trying to get at him through the wood. Now the moments became ages of suspense and torture, then a pause, and again the gentle creeping sound, that grew fainter and fainter, and died away in the direction whence it had originally come. The man, hardly daring to draw breath, moved his head slightly round, and had a dim vision of a dark moving figure, between which and his hiding-place the distance was quickly increasing. What was it? Man, woman, or goblin? He could not tell.

Quietly he kept his place until all was as still as death—he had ceased to note the voice of the outer storm—then, emerging from his shelter, he looked around. He was no coward, anyhow.

"No, I bean't afeared of ghosties," he repeated; but I wur dom skeared." And then he walked round his tree.

Exactly on the opposite side to which he had been standing, there lay a moss-covered log of felled timber, and by it, on the ground, was something white and small. He lifted it up. It was a paper, not sealed or fastened, but folded like a letter. This he placed carefully in his pocket, and still wondering what had caused the scratching noise behind his head, concluded that the mysterious visitor must have been hiding or searching for this letter, which in the darkness had mistaken its way. Would it be missed? and would the creature come back to look for it?

This reflection determined him, to seek again the high-road to which he had been directed, and not to retain his night's lodging.

Before a final departure, however, he raised himself by one foot on the log of

wood lying on the ground, and felt the surface of the tree-trunk with his horny hand. There was a basin-like hollow just above where his head must have rested.

He dived his fingers into this, and found a square book, and a something else that sent a thrill of joyful anticipation through his frame—a small heavy packet, securely tied. In the fast-growing darkness he clasped his treasure-trove, and hiding it about his person, sought, with a brisk and animated step, the road he had before deserted, and was soon marching toward Wetherbury town.

He was now, for the nonce, a gentleman of independent property. He made himself very comfortable for the night, took just sufficient liberty with the “cheering cup” to produce a little foolishness of manner, and retired early to rest, after dropping a few tears over his mis-spent youth, and vainly trying to make his fat and jolly landlord of “The Three Crowns” weep with him over

the fact that he had "niver had no sort of edication."

He felt this even after the morning light had restored his equilibrium, for he was unable to gratify his curiosity with regard to the letter he had picked up, as well as the contents of the book.

Not daring to refer for assistance to any one in the neighbourhood, in fear of awkward complications, he resolved to remove himself and his secrets from Wetherbury, and enjoying the goods the gods had provided, to await a better opportunity for enlightenment.

Some weeks afterwards the little packet was empty of its hoard, and the book, containing its pitiful appeal for a merciful judgment, lay damp and sodden at the bottom of a ditch ; and Letty's sad eyes never rested on its contents.





CHAPTER III.

THEY CLING TO THE STRAW.

WHEN Letty awoke from her heavy sleep the morning after Emily's arrival, first, in the hazy indistinctness of her weak bodily state, not quite recognizing herself or her whereabouts, she wondered for an instant why the light seemed to shine from an unaccustomed corner of the room, and then by degrees, as she looked about her, the heavy sorrow at her heart returned. As her weary eyes watched the leaping spluttering flame of the nightlight, whose colour paled and died away in the brightness of the coming dawn, she retraced all that

painful scene that was ever present to her, and greedily her memory dwelt on every word she had listened to, that now seemed so clearly to declare—whatever his fault—his love for her, his hatred of the other. The poor tortured nature was in the very whirlpool of sorrow's passion.

Her loathing of falsehood, her wrecked hopes, alternated with her love, her pity, and the conscience that called her a coward from her duty. The recollection of his face, his stricken, hopeless, miserable despair, as he sat at the breakfast-table that morning, came back to her with a suggestion that made her flush and tremble. Others had done it; men *had* sought to flee from present suffering, cutting adrift with their own hands the poor life more tempest-tossed than they could bear! If so now, she would be to blame. Had she not promised for better and for worse? At this moment, nothing seemed to justify the desertion of her post; and then came back to her mind the pedlar

—the letter—the help that he had promised, telling her not to fear.

She half raised herself with a smothered cry, and realizing how weak and helpless she was, sank back on her pillow with a despairing moan. The sound was not loud enough to rouse the professional lady, who slumbered heavily beside the infant in an inner room, but it reached the ears of Lettice Graham, standing at the window of an adjoining chamber, watching the beautiful dawn of the autumn day. She came to Letty's bedside, and this time, to the oft-repeated question, "Has Emily come?" could reply that she was upstairs, ready when wanted. And then Aunt Lettice took the feverish hand in her cool grasp and spoke—

"Stephen was not well, darling; but your uncle will stay with him until his father's arrival."

"Is that all, Aunt Lettice? He is not hurt, or in danger?"

"No, my child. He is safe and in careful

hands ; not hurt, ill from shock — and — anxiety for you."

" Oh, thank God ! "

That worst of ills was, then, averted. And the light outside grew stronger, and the sparrows twittered their commonplaces under the eaves. The shroud of darkness was withdrawn, another day had broken, *his* name had been spoken to her once more. Emily had come. Almost she felt as if she were returning to a world that had seemed lost to her for ever.

With a sorrowful countenance, the girl gazed on the white and altered face of her mistress.

" Tell me all, Emily. Why did you stay so long ? "

" Master was took so bad, ma'am. I thought I'd stay till some one came."

" Have you been with him ? Have you seen him ? "

" No, ma'am."

" Who is with him ? "

“Only the men, ma’am. Doctor bid to have no women about. They was not needed.”

A sigh of relief escaped from Letty; then she motioned to the girl to come nearer, and whispered eagerly—

“Those voices in the ruins—did you hear or see anything more?”

This question nearly threw Emily off her balance. Of a truth, the latter facts had put an extinguisher on those preceding them, and until that moment she had never thought of tracing in that half-familiar voice, heard in a moment of deadly fear, an identity with that of the quondam housekeeper—the woman who now appeared as the embodiment of all the evil that had occurred.

Only a short pause, however, and she replied—

“No, Miss Letty; nothing more.”

Then, with a soft pink flush spreading over her face at her own dissimulation—

“Say nothing about those voices,” Letty

whispered. "It was so foolish of me to be frightened and run away, when I knew wicked people were trying to injure your master, and I always thought I didn't mind ghosts until then. It will all be put right by-and-by, and the ruins pulled down, in the mean time, don't tell any one what you saw or heard; people make such mountains out of mole-hills."

With tears in her eyes, and quick to perceive what a brave stand her dear lady was taking; feeling that she must have acquired a knowledge of the real facts, and that she was struggling to disguise them, the girl again promised silence.

Then Letty asked that her bag might be left beside her, and she thought she would like to rest; so Emily stole quietly from the room.

Miserable as it all was, hope seemed reviving, and the straw, that had saved her from drowning, was the pedlar's letter. She opened her bag and took it out. The look

of it, the touch of it, the feeling of the clasp all brought back to her the untold misery of that last morning at home, not now allayed by the feeling of wounded pride that had then supported her, but made, if possible, more intense by the bitter sting of her remorse. Far above the petty sum of her own wrongs—so she argued—was all that *he* had suffered through his long day of trial! A strange piece of mechanism indeed is a woman's heart! Had the course of their lives run smoothly, and Stephen been a pattern of his kind, his young wife's heart would have kept to summer heat, set fair, and gone on with its unvarying pit-pat, pit-pat, like the old clock on the stair. But his moods were fitful and morose, her anxieties about him were continually on the *qui vive*, and her own ears had borne witness to some scathing secret connected with that portion of his life which was unknown to her. Far, however, from extinguishing the flame of her love, these facts lit it into a blaze of

unreasoning passion, that sent up a smoke which veiled every known and unknown fault in oblivion, and left *his* sorrow and *his* love for her, the bright points of light in the middle of the "smother!"

She was determined to give the lead now in refusing to believe *any* one's testimony against Stephen while one little vestige of hope remained.

This programme she carried out with rigour. She told her anxious family about the ghosts, and the strange meeting with the pedlar, and how her nervous fears had wrought upon her. "And please, dear father," she added, "find a trusty, secret messenger to take a letter to this address. It is safer than the post, and I feel quite sure this reply will set everything right that any one may think to be wrong now."

The father heard her, with the words of Colonel Graham's letter burning into his memory. Her aunt, with a glow of admiration at her courage and faithfulness, and

Mrs. Ashley, fearing the consequences of all this excitement, brought the infant in her arms and laid it, in its peaceful and innocent slumber, beside the throbbing heart of its sad young mother.

On the night when Letty had so suddenly appeared at Widbury, the squire's attention had been greatly drawn to Willy Downs. Through all that painful business, he had been so sympathetic, so respectful, and so quick and intelligent in taking in all aspects of the circumstances, that now, when he reflected on the question of a messenger, the most trustworthy and active to be found, his choice fell on Willy Downs. Both Mrs. Ashley and Mrs. Graham agreed to the wisdom of his selection, as being also one which would keep the affair within its original circle.

Old Mrs. Watson flushed with pride and pleasure to hear her boy had won such golden opinions at the hall, and suggested that the squire should obtain Mr. Coch-

rane's assent to the lad's temporary absence. About this there was no difficulty ; and, matters being arranged to every one's satisfaction, Willy Downs was driven home by the squire, and received his instructions on the road.

" Now, my lad," he said, " I want a trusty messenger to take the coach to Bymouth to-night. Ask the good grandmother to make all necessary arrangements, and then come to me in my study, and I will give you final instructions."

So the squire sought Letty's room, and, sitting with his back to the light, that she might not too plainly see his sorrowful and careworn countenance, told her what he had done, and asked her to dictate to him what she wished to say. He added, the man seemed illiterate, and the messenger was so far in their confidence, that he thought it would be as well to acquaint him with the tenor of the letter they sent.

Poor Letty ! Her lips had never shaped

the thing she longed to know, nor could she bring herself to give it expression. To gain time, she drew the letter once more from the bag, which she kept beside her, and said—

“Just read it, father.”

He took it from her hand, and, walking to the window, read aloud—

“If they tell lies to try and lower you from your proper place, send word to Ben Josephs, Ships’ Inn, Bymouth—watchword Lizbeth—never fear.”

There came a sort of comfort in the sound of it, and Letty’s courage revived.

“Yes,” she said, as he again took his place beside her, and she held out her shapely white hand to be held in his loving and protecting clasp. “Of course, daddy, he must know the ‘watchword,’ and I would only write, ‘The lady who found you fainting would be glad to know all you promised to tell her. The messenger has the watchword, and is in her confidence.’”

Then they were silent, thinking and feel-

ing together, hand clasped in hand, such thoughts as could not well bear the outline of hard words; and, as the sunshine came more level through the room, and the hour appointed for Willy's visit approached, the father rose, and kissed her on the forehead with a whispered "God bless my brave child!" and left the room.

Very soon after, the letter was written, and full instructions as to his mission had been given to Willy. The lad had gone away with his bright dark eyes so full of interest and latent determination, it made the squire feel almost as if his enthusiasm must have a kind of power to produce the good tidings he was required to bring. He leant back in his library chair, with a faint hope putting aside his dark fears.

Why should the man have been so confident, and have volunteered this information in reference to an evil that had not as yet manifested itself, unless he held the clue to some dark mystery?

Utterly worn out by all the agony of mind he had been enduring for the past four and twenty hours, this little struggle towards a breaking light, soothed him into a few moments' peaceful slumber. Short reprieve!

The very coach that had taken on the messenger of hope, brought further news from Long Dene. Colonel Graham's letter had contained a suggestion of dreadful import, in quoting the assertion of the woman "who looked wicked enough for anything," but *this* letter from Lord Mortlands was no suggestion merely—

"This great sorrow falls on us all. I wish I could think it but a passing cloud. The woman is here— young and beautiful. Her claims you have heard; and, alas! that I should say it, they are backed by every seeming proof. She told me when the marriage took place. She directed me to the finding of the certificate among Stephen's papers—and there it was found. I know one witness, whose signature it bears— young Lennard Wilmot. I know him to be a young man of wild and dissolute character, not often responsible for his actions, through his habits of drinking. I can but

write and ask him if really he gave his witness to this disgraceful act. Though fairly educated, the young woman plainly shows the lowly origin, which, indeed, she does not deny. My son is quite incapable of explaining the terrible crime of his second marriage. Certainly his sin has found him out. My head goes round as I write. I cannot believe it. The poor mother comes to-morrow. I would do anything in the world to keep this blow from falling on our beloved one. Have you yet been able to ascertain how much the dear child knows, and in what way she discovered it?"

Here was indeed fresh cause for sorrow and despair; but, again, there came the pedlar's words, "If any tell lies to lower you from your proper place."

This was the very contingency from which, in a few days, Willy Downs might release them. He resolved to convey this crumb of comfort to Lord Mortlands; and, as for Letty, he would speak to her no further word. That she knew the threatened evil to its full extent he felt quite sure; so did he feel quite sure that she would combat every new light in Stephen's disfavour, by the weapon of that pedlar's letter, and if,

even in *his* despair, it had given him a modicum of hope, why should not his poor child have the benefit of it too?

And the more Letty thought it all over, the more she rested her loving eyes on the soft little being nestling in her arms,—the more she clothed herself in the panoply of endurance for the dear sake of her child and its father. She would not listen to another word until that letter came.





CHAPTER IV.

THE POWER OF LOVE.

SO Willy Downs had started on his journey, but long before his return home the scene at Long Dene had somewhat changed. Pending all the necessary inquiries, and taking into consideration the fact that, under any circumstances, it was absolutely needful that the woman, who made a claim to be his lawful wife, should be carefully kept from Stephen's sight, Lord Mortlands, in a peremptory form, had required the absence of Lizzie Moore, arranging for her to leave the house before Lady Mortlands' arrival.

She had departed, vowing vengeance, not

only on the house of Mortlands, but on every servant and retainer within the large circle of its service. She had, for the present, taken up her abode in Wetherbury Inn. She had wished to call herself Mrs. Stephen Holdness, but found few people willing to take this view; and she had been advised not to press the matter, for her own sake, until the question was decided.

On Lady Mortlands' arrival, Colonel Graham had returned to Shirley.

Letty's action had been so quick, so decided, and, in the few words she had been compelled to speak on the subject, she had shown herself so fully prepared for any contingency, so capable of self-control, though so passionately desirous of once more seeing Stephen, whose mental state had been gently broken to her, that her wish to start as soon as possible had been complied with, in spite of Colonel Graham's strong opposition, believing, as he did, that Letty really had no right in Stephen's home.

Letters to the same purport from Lord and Lady Mortlands, written sorely against the grain, and containing feeble remonstrances, had only reached Shirley just about the time when Letty and the dear father were driving under the great old trees of Long Dene avenue. Hope had indeed been to her a lover's staff. All the friends by whom she was surrounded were amazed to see the bold front with which she faced her misfortunes. The only time she gave way to the natural relief of tears was when she kissed her sleeping babe and left it in her mother's arms; but by the time her father was ready and seated beside her she was quite calm again. They rested half-way at her mother's earnest injunction, and it was wonderful how she roused herself and talked of anything but the absorbing subject of her thoughts.

How every incident of her first drive up that avenue came back to her recollection! With what new readings did many a past

trifle recur to her mind ! It was a sad and pathetic home-coming. Stephen's mother met them at the door, and led the pale, silent, courageous young wife straight upstairs to the room she herself occupied, there to await the doctor, as it was deemed better to have him on the spot. They sat mostly in a hand-clasped silence.

Letty's impatience and wild longing were getting almost beyond her control, and she felt that her strength lay in restraint even from words—that one chance sentence might unseal her pent-up feelings and leave her unfitted for what she had to undergo.

At last the little man arrived. His pleasure to see Mrs. Holdness was great. He was quite sure that her presence would only have a beneficial effect on Mr. Holdness, but he thought it his duty to suggest that the interview might be more than Mrs. Holdness could judiciously attempt. He advised a short delay, and Lady Mort-

lands upheld his opinion ; but Letty, looking sadly in her mother-in-law's face, said simply—

“Could anything hurt me more than waiting?”

What words can convey her sensations, as she stood once more inside the familiar room, so lovingly prepared for *her*, as she saw him sitting by the window, his bowed head in his hands? His mother went up to him.

“Stephen, my son?”

He rose hurriedly ; he spoke impatiently.

“Who are you? Why do you come? I was listening for her. Some one always frightens her away. When will you all go, and let her come back to me. Letty! my Letty!

She stood beside him.

“I *have* come, Stephen,” she said.

* * * * *

“Oh, sovereign power of love,
Oh, grief ; oh, balm !”

Reason had returned, but physical strength had given way, one fainting fit succeeded another. The return of consciousness and memory awoke the effort to speak, to say something—for which there was no power of utterance.

After many painful hours he fell into a deep and dreamless sleep, and the little doctor, establishing himself in the room, gave strict injunctions to Lady Mortlands regarding Letty.

She, poor child! was much too reasonable to object, and, trusting in the promise that she should at once be called if the patient again became restless, went resolutely to bed in an adjoining room. At first, sleep seemed impossible. Her power over Stephen had brought a ray of comfort, sadly broken by the shadows that covered it, and as she lay thinking her weary thoughts, it struck her that she would be brave, and listen to what others knew, or thought they knew. It mattered little what it was. The answer

to her letter would soon arrive, and meantime she was at her post, and *nothing* should remove her. Towards morning a merciful oblivion came to her for a few hours, but the day was not very old when Lady Mortlands, coming quietly to her bedside, saw that she was wide-awake and ready to bestir herself, and in answer to her look of inquiry, said—

“He is very weak, but quiet; he cannot speak, but understands and recognizes. Dr. Slade says perfect freedom from excitement is necessary. He knows that you are here and resting, and is quite content. If you went to him now, he would probably make the painful effort to speak that so exhausted him yesterday, so please, dear child, take the rest you so require.”

Partly Letty acquiesced, but said she should feel more rested if she came downstairs, and eventually she appeared, pale and calm, at the breakfast-table.

Now it so happened that the letter from Lennard Wilmot, whose name as witness was on the certificate, had that morning arrived. It lay in Lord Mortlands' breast pocket, and the knowledge of its contents was as a piercing sword. He had paced the sunlit terrace that morning with the squire, both silent, both expectant—but after the post came in, its burden was too weighty to lay bare.

Yes; Mr. Wilmot much regretted to say he recollected having been present at a private marriage, and he believed he signed his name. That it was a secret and not to be acknowledged he knew; but he had heard afterwards that his friend was free, and seeing his marriage to another lady in the paper, had concluded it was all right. He had, of course, never mentioned the circumstance, and hoped very much he might not be required to say more about it, without reference to Mr. Holdness himself.

As Lord Mortlands watched the fragile young mother taking the place that she thought was hers by right, the sight was almost more than he could bear.

However, he little calculated on the strength of character that dwelt in that same fragile form; nor, pondering painfully on what was to be done next, did he expect to have the course of procedure taken out of his hands, and no option left him in the matter.

When her labours with teapot, urn, and cream ewer were accomplished—those little common everyday things that are the silent witnesses of so many human tragedies and comedies—Letty rose and went straight at the purpose in her mind.

“I think,” she said, “the library is the quietest room in the house at this hour. Could not we all go there. I have so much to ask about. Please come, madre, and I will lead the way.”

The invitation was too sudden to be

discussed, nor was time given. Lord Mortlands and Mr. Ashley, not daring even to exchange a glance, followed the two ladies.

Letty motioned her father to an armchair, then stooped and kissed him on the forehead. For a moment her lips quivered and the hot tears came into her eyes, but that was all. Drawing out a little footstool from beneath the couch where Lady Mortlands had taken up her position, she placed herself at her feet, one little hand laid firmly on the knee of the elder lady, whose tears could not be restrained.

Then, in an even measured tone, Letty spoke.

“This is all I know. There had always been a belief among the servants that the old wing of this house was haunted. One day I found a man in a fainting state in the kitchen garden. I helped him. When he recovered he spoke strange words, and said something about ghosts, and promised a

letter that would explain things. Afterwards I went to the ruins. I heard voices that were not ghosts' voices ; the things they said pained me. I was afraid—because—because of baby. I was angry, too, and that was why I was cowardly enough to run away. Now I want to know all that happened afterwards, all that any one believes, imagines, or suspects, that I may understand the whole situation. I know you will be patient with me if I do not consent to agree with all you think. I am waiting for that poor man's letter ; it may bring light on every doubtful question."

Doubtful ? Alas !

Trying to be matter-of-fact and cold, following her strong example, Lord Mortlands began. Of course he could not proceed far without telling of the housekeeper's disguise and her open claim. At first Letty sat quite still and listened, but when that hated name burst on her hearing and she recalled

the woman's figure hovering round the breakfast-room door, on that memorable morning when she was flying from her home, a wild look of horror dilated her eyes, she gave a sob, a gasp for breath, and hid her face in her hands. There was dead silence for a moment, then Lord Mortlands began to speak again. Letty raised her poor throbbing head.

"Wait," she said hoarsely; "wait one moment. I am trying to understand it all."

She rose, and with tight-clasped hands walked to the window and stood there until her self-control had returned. Then seating herself rigidly on the couch beside Lady Mortlands, said—

"I am ready now."

But there was no time for more. Outside the door came a sound of voices, Grave remonstrance and shrill reply. The white and scared face of Gray looked in at the library door.

“If you please, milord,” he said ; but a woman’s voice interrupted him—

“Stand aside, you silly old man ! Who, may I ask, has given you the right to pick and choose your visitors ?”

Letty started from her place, all her courage returning, all her dignity of wifehood and motherhood. Very beautiful she looked, and utterly devoid of fear, as she stood facing the handsome enemy, who swooped down upon her, and drew up in bold defiance in front of that couch where she had played her successful little comedy some time before.

Lady Mortlands gave a faint cry, while her husband and Mr. Ashley advanced to bar the progress of the intruder. But Letty waved them back. Gray’s regard for appearances overcame his curiosity ; he was retreating to join his fellows, and was closing the door softly with the probable intention of remaining in its vicinity (but that is his undivulged secret), when Letty, in a tone of

command that she had never used before, called him back.

“Open the door wide,” she said; “there is nothing to conceal,” and turning her frank, fearless eyes on her unwelcome visitor, continued in the same tone, slowly, distinctly, coldly. “*You*—you, the woman who struggles into my presence in this unseemly manner, *you* have accorded to my servant that right you question, by having been in my employment, and taken my wages, for above one year. There are courts of law in which just claims may be tried. *This* is not one; at present it is my private sitting-room, and if you do not instantly leave it, my men-servants have my orders to eject you by force. Go!”

She pointed to the door. Her words had taken a ready effect. A male contingent waiting outside strained towards this unexpected chance of revenging many a private grievance; while the bold words and courage of their gentle mistress roused every spark

of indignation and resentment on less selfish grounds.

The woman looked helplessly round. She attempted to address Lord Mortlands, who, utterly dismayed by the confirmation of facts received that morning, and known only to him, was for the moment speechless ; and as for the others, Letty's vigour and logic, in dealing with the sudden occurrence, had as completely subdued them as her words had roused her faithful servitors. The woman, led, hustled, hurried from the room and along the passage, attempted still to have a hearing.

"Have you shown her my marriage lines, milord?" Derisive shouts drowned the words. They led her down the back way. They brought her conveyance into the back yard. With every indignity the kitchen and scullery could devise, they pushed her out of the house and into the chariot from Wetherbury Inn. The last words she heard, as livid with helpless rage she left the house she had

so triumphantly approached, was an oration delivered by the knife-boy, whom she had been wont to grind—

“Ger out, ye painted Jezebel ; who’d give marriage lines to like o’ she ? Her’s got the infernal sack this time.”





CHAPTER V.

BY THE COACH.

THE coach to Bymouth was pretty full all the way ; and spite of the saddening influences under which he was being driven along, Willy Downs enjoyed his journey. His acquaintances in real life were very limited in number, but in his dreamland of fiction the circle was large and varied, and as the busy world and its stir was around him, he began to recognize and pick them all out. Nearly every inn at which they stopped had its counterpart in some remembered description ; and, besides this, as he watched his companions, he wove his own fancies about them, according to his wont.

Then, when darkness fell over the scene, and there was less to attract the eye, his thoughts would turn back to the stirring recollections of the last ten days. Lulled by the rumble of the wheels, and the steady even ring of the horses' hoofs upon the road, between waking and dreaming he would go over each phase of recent events, and dip into the future that might arise out of their ashes.

The squire had always been a good friend to him, and to his Granny. And Miss Letty!

Ever since the days when she would come to the school feasts with Mrs. Ashley, in all her pretty childish ribbons and laces, looking, as he thought, like a princess in a fairy-tale, he had been her vowed and respectful slave; and whenever he had read a tale of heroine, or beauteous queen, or brave and glorious damosel, the ideal being had taken Letty's form, and voice, and eyes. All through his life he thought his first duty would be to them—Miss Letty and the squire.

And then "the pity of it" would come back to him as he remembered the morning of that eventful day, and Emma Phillips's stricken face.

Each day since then he had called at the Lake Cottage as usual. She had never let him in beyond the porch. The baby was thriving, she said, and she had tried to smile in saying it; but the sadness did not leave her pallid face, there was no thankful gladness in her eyes. What did it all mean?

When they stopped at the Coach and Horses Inn, Forminster, Willy had a sudden shock. He woke up to hear the coachman say—

"Well, well; I be main sorry fur to hear it. Never better guard travelled with this coach! It was safety for the passengers to catch sight of his face in the dark night changes, that it wur. Dear, dear, dear; that be bad luck for we!"

"What guard?" Willy asked of an ostler that stood near.

"Guard Phillips," the man replied ; "he fell and hurted hisself so badly, it's just mebbe he'll live or die. He's to the hospital here."

"How long do we stop? Is it far?" Willy said, excitedly. "I come from his home, near Widbury. His poor wife! Oh, if I could only see him."

"It's a good step, sir," the man said ; "you'd likely miss your place."

Of course, under the circumstances, this could not be risked, so there was nothing for it but to slip a shilling into the ostler's hand, and ask to have the last news waiting for him, when he passed through on his return journey, adding, "Just to pay you for your trouble. I am going to Bymouth, and return the same day."

The dawn had well broken when they reached their destination, and the glorious sea was sparkling in the light of a sunny day, when they first sighted the town and the harbour which is its pride. To the

right the hanging wood in all its autumn richness, and to left and right the soft green slopes running round the bay, as if stretching out their arms to shield it from the outer storms. Everything looked so gay and bright, that our young traveller wished he, like Christian in the "Pilgrim's Progress," might just lay down the burden that he carried, and lift it also from the shoulders of those who were so oppressed. He took a short rest and refreshment after his long journey, and with a revival of hope, and invested with a certain feeling of dignity, remembering his important trust, pursued his way to the Ships' Inn. This was situated quite at the lower end of the town, but the long walk stretched his limbs, and gave him new vigour after his enforced bodily inaction. Having with difficulty discovered the quay on which it was situated, the inn itself was easily recognized by the gaily painted sign which hung above the door. This, however, absorbed all the gaiety about the place. It

was a poor tavern, and the whole vicinity bore marks of dilapidated fisher habitations.

A sturdy urchin of about three years of age was playing in front of the door, and seemed at that hour to be almost the first being alive to a new day.

He looked wonderingly at Willy as he came near, and then shyly ran away to the tavern door, burying his face in the apron of a woman who had appeared there, broom in hand. She looked up at the young man as he approached, and Willy's heart beat loud and fast with expectant fears, as the crucial question began to form itself upon his lips, and a full tide of feeling surged into his sensitive mind, carrying the consciousness of all the answer might lead up to.

“Does Mr. Josephs live here?”

The woman paused an instant before replying, and in her look (which seemed to take in as much as outward appearance could indicate of her visitor's station and general character), there was an intelligent discern-

ment. Her inspection ended with an inquiring look into Willy's flushed and conscious face, but she only said—

“Near by he do ; just bide a bit.” And leaving her broom against the doorpost, she walked away and disappeared at the door of a small detached cottage a little way further down the quay, the child holding on to her skirts and running beside her. Very soon she returned, and coming back to Willy, said—

“That's the house, the master 'ull see to 'ee.”

The “master” stood at the door of the small habitation when Willy arrived there, looking grotesquely out of proportion with his surroundings. His fair, well-featured face was bronzed and somewhat lined, but bore an expression of humour and courage combined, as if its owner were not easily depressed or daunted. His face was clean shaven, he wore a coarse blue striped sailor's jersey, and his throat was bare. Yet, despite

his dress and his dwelling, his brief interrogation, "Ben Josephs?" elicited a very ready "Yes, sir," from the lad who stood before him.

The "master" smiled. There are some smiles that seem to be concentrated essence of that touch of nature that claims brotherhood of all mankind, and this was one. He and Willy stood looking at each other for a few seconds without a further step on either side. At last the "master" raised his brows, and pointing with his thumb over his shoulder, said—

"Does he expect you?"

"Perhaps," said Willy, shortly.

Making a sign to Willy to enter, and placing a chair for him by the wide cheerful fireplace, the "master" sat down on another, and took a long look at his companion, while he spoke as follows—

"The fact is, poor Josephs is ill, and—well, in fact, fretting for tidings about a friend—and every one that comes near the

place excites him. He has been broad awake all night, and a good bit off his head. He is dozing now; and if he wants to say anything to you, he will be better for a rest first. I'm not much of a sick nurse, but, you see, Josephs is my friend. They don't grow wild on my property, and I've had this one some years now, poor devil! So you won't mind waiting?"

"No," Willy said; "I'm in no hurry. If I can, I should like to catch the coach this evening; but the day is before us. I am sorry; I hope the illness is not very serious."

"Well," the other slowly answered, gazing out of the door across the sea, "I suppose it is what folk call serious—I ain't much of a judge." And then he turned away, walked to the other end of the room and said sharply, "Have a drink?"

"No, thank you; I had my breakfast at the inn."

The "master" filled a tankard that stood upon the dresser and took a deep draught;

then, turning again to Willy, struck upon his broad chest with his fist, and with a twinkle of mirth in his eyes spoke in a light tone—

“Breakfast? What was it? Bread and milk? Lord! it’s years since I was weaned. Never mind, stick to it, lad, while you can stomach it.”

There was a sound of movement in the inner room, and a deep voice came out of the stillness.

“Any news?”

The tall man moved quickly to the door.

“I think so.”

“What?”

“There, don’t move; lie still. Come in, young man.”

Willy rose and followed the master.

On a bed in the corner lay the pallid wreck of what had been a strong man. His bed and all his surroundings, and the furniture of the room generally, was of a superior order to what Willy had expected to find.

The sick man raised himself and turned an anxious and inquiring look on the new-comer. Then, sinking back on the pillow his friend had arranged, asked—

“Have you spoken with him, master?”

“He’s grit,” the other replied. “He won’t speak; and, before *you* begin, Ben, just take what I have ready for ’ee. It doan’t do to talk too much fasting. See here, I’ll set ’im down beside ’ee, while I get ’ee summat;” and, addressing Willy in an utterly different tone of voice, “You do the talking gently, just to ease his mind; and before we get beyond our bowing acquaintance, let me inquire what your godfathers and godmothers did for you at your baptism?”

Feeling serious as he did, this sudden speech for the instant produced no idea in Willy’s mind but Sunday School and Church Catechism—until, meeting the humorous glance of his questioner as he politely placed a chair for him by the sick man’s bed, he

jumped into more complete understanding, and with an answering smile replied—

“Willie Downs.”

His new acquaintance laughed and slapped him on the shoulder.

“All right; we’ll say Downs for short. My name is Peters.”

When left alone with Ben Josephs, Willy, turning over in his mind the best thing to be done, had rightly come to the conclusion that it would ease his expectant companion’s mind to be satisfied that he carried his credentials. So he bent his head and said in a low voice—

“The lady sent me. She gave me a letter.”

“Watchword?” Ben asked eagerly.

“Lizbeth.”

Ben again lay back on his pillows, waiting obediently as his friend had suggested.

He was indeed a friend. Willy watched him in wonderment, ministering as gently as a woman to his companion’s wants; his slow,

lazy movement one moment belieing his quick energy the next. One instant the cynic, the next the sympathizer, his blue eyes ready for mirth or madness, sadness or smiles, Willy Downs thought him the strangest specimen of the human race that he had ever seen, while he recognized in him a something good and lovable, to which a something in himself was drawn, by sympathy on his own level and by a respect and regard as rendered to that which was of a higher and noble nature.





CHAPTER VI.

A HUMAN SOUL.

WHEN Peters drew aside the curtain across the window in the little room, that the light might fall upon the letter which Willy Downs had placed in his hands, Ben Josephs, with knitted brows and pointing finger, as though it were an unusual labour, read what the squire had written.

“All—I promised—to tell—her,” he repeated slowly. “Why does she want to know?”

“I can tell you,” Willy said. “Our young lady from the Hall had some terrible sorrow at home in Wetherbury; and she came straight away, and her baby was born in the

village before she got to her own home. The squire is my kind friend, and—I would die for her. He bid me bring this letter—he said he had written just as she said—and he gave me the watchword, and told me there was a woman trying to rob his child of her name, and her honour, and you had help in your hand; and oh, Mr. Josephs, if you could know how good and kind they are!” And, warmed into eloquence by his earnest feeling, the lad told his tale—the sad change that had come over their happy faces, and how their sorrow had hung a gloom over every cottage in the place, among a people that had known and loved the daughter of the Hall from her earliest childhood until she had left them as a happy bride.

Peters sat astride a chair with his back to them, his face to the windows, and had remained motionless throughout Willy’s enthusiastic outburst. He spoke abruptly, without turning round—

“What does Mr. Holdness say about it?”

“Mr. Holdness!” Willy answered. “He can’t say anything; he’s off his head, with two men to watch him.”

For a few moments there was unbroken silence. Then Peters rose from his chair. His face had taken a new expression: it was grave and stern. He came to the foot of the bed, and placing his hands on the rail, looked long and earnestly into Ben Josephs’ face.

“Yes, Ben,” he said at length, “we little meant that our fool’s jest should have a consequence like this, and what we can tell is but a drop in the sea of trouble. We can give that gentle young lady law and right on her side; but who can give her again her faith and trust in the man she loved, and who has deceived her? God! What can one weigh in the balance with love and trust betrayed? Will the whole wide world, and the dwellers therein, ever lose the stain, —the blight, that blast of Satan’s nostrils can

throw over all that was so good, so fair to see and feel ? ”

He clasped his hands above his head, and turning once more to the window, stood looking out through the latticed panes, while the sick man closed his eyes, and his white face seemed to grow more drawn and pallid.

Willy felt outside it all. Truly the scene was different from what he had pictured.

One thing his quick perception showed him clearly. The master was more than an eccentric human being ; his words, his voice and gesture, when excited and off his guard, plainly betrayed that he was masquerading in another rank of life than that which properly belonged to him.

The strain of this situation did not last long. Peters turned, and, bending over the invalid, murmured a few words, ending with a short laugh, and—

“ Now business, and bar sentiment. You see, Downs, Josephs is very fond of talking, but not up to it. So I must be spokesman.

He came back from his expedition the other day, rather knocked up by the journey, and—the experience. Now, with care and attention, as the doctors say, he is better, but not strong. As well as he could, he explained to me all he knew of the unfortunate business, and I have had great difficulty in keeping him quiet, until the messenger he has been expecting arrived. The story is long, and he is short of breath; so I really think the best way is to save him the labour, and write the answer myself. I'll bring the letter to you before the coach starts. Your sympathy and interest in the matter are so keen, that to comfort you I can tell you this much. A certain certificate of marriage, which has surely been brought forward is—worth a snap of the finger. The clergyman who performed the rite—he gave a bitter laugh—"well, he was an unmitigated scum of the earth."

"No, master, no," Ben interrupted, looking wildly and beseechingly at his companion.

"I cannot, will not, let you talk like that."

Peters held up a commanding finger.

"Silence in the court ! Well, to use less variegated language, he was not a clergyman at all. There's no forgery—it requires no witness to disprove it. Go to the place it's dated from. Any respectable authority—even a bishop—will speedily certify that there never was such a minister of the church—such a clerk in holy orders. It was a back-parlour comedy, played by some drunken idiots, a witch woman, and a man befooled with more than mere wine. There ! That will comfort you. It's all you need to know. How I wish I could take the bitter taste out of it. Ben, old man, beest tired ?"

For an anxious shade had overcast his friend's face.

"No ; but when she gets the sack, how shall I find her ? And there's the child."

"Well, we must think all that over," Peters answered. "Now you lie quiet a bit."

Taking Willy by the arm, he led him into the outer room, and lifting up his cap placed it upon the lad's head, and walked with him a few steps beyond the house-door.

Willy felt strangely drawn to this acquaintance of an hour, and when Peters paused as if to dismiss him, the dreamy dark eyes said as much to the mocking blue ones, that now indeed were kindled with an inner fire that could flame furiously on occasion.

“Good-bye, Downs,” he said. “Willy Downs! I shall remember your name. Before we part I will ask a kindness of you. Beg of your kind squire and the gentle lady to keep this address in their memories as a dead secret, and to destroy its written record. Ben Josephs is only a passing guest; when he is well again, this place will know him no more. The queer old hole suits me, but if people were to find it out, I should be a wanderer again. By the way, you have given yourself a name, but no local habita-

tion. What is your village? and who is your squire?"

"My home is Widbury, and my squire is Mr. Ashley of Shirley Hall."

The hand that rested on Willy's shoulder was suddenly lifted, with a muttered "Good God!" and Peters, fiercer and sterner than before, stood looking straight into space, while his young companion, startled and silent, trembled with excitement.

Like a cloud on a stormy April day, chased by quick keen sunshine, Peters' face cleared. He repeated the low mocking laugh that always seemed the prelude to his changing moods.

"The baby?" he said. "Is it a boy or a girl?"

Poor Willy! the word "baby" always recalled to him one sad and miserable scene, and for the moment he was unable to reply; but Peters jogged his memory.

"I mean Miss Ash—Mrs. Stephen Holdness's baby?"

“Oh, I don’t really know,” said Willy.

His strange acquaintance stopped, and whispered in his ear—

“Let us pray it is a boy. Good-bye until this evening.”

Walking back in the direction in which he had come, Willy again saw the woman and child, near the open door of the Ships’ Inn. The woman sat in the sunshine with some coarse sewing, and the child was engaged in the old-world occupation of mud-pie making. The urchin noticed Willy’s approach, and stood up on his sturdy little legs. The neat, clean, well-dressed visitor struck upon his senses as something foreign to the locality, and murmuring some words, intelligible only to those accustomed to his infant language, he lifted a little stone and began to wrap it in a covering of mud and dirt, preliminary to an assault; at least, such was the woman’s idea of his intention, for she threw down her work, and rushing on him, seized his arm, and shook the missile out of his little fist,

loudly reprimanding him as, "just about the downdaciostest little fellar in Bymouth town."

Under other circumstances the novelty of an idle day spent in a new locality, surrounded by unfamiliar things, would have been to Willy Downs a very full and delightful experience; but to-day nothing had power to attract his thoughts or observation, concentrated as they were round this tale of wrong and sorrow, and occupied by the fascination with which Peters had inspired him. Dreamer as he was, he pondered deeply over the mystery of his strange attraction to this man, and according to his wont built up a history in his lively imagination, always apportioning to his new acquaintance a crown of victory, bravely won over self. Temptation, struggles, falling, may be, but ever a brave endurance, and conquest in the end, though sadness and loneliness were his lot. In this irresistible romance-weaving, the satisfactory issue of his long journey in

the main, though hedged about with painful complications, kept coming and going in his mind, but even that was shadowed and overmastered by his longing to see Peters once more.

For hours before there was any chance of his coming, he sat at the window of the coffee-room waiting, looking at the passers-by without seeing them, or noticing any detail of the moving scene before his eyes.

When Peters did arrive it was quite at the eleventh hour, and Willy, nearly distracted by the delay, had almost resolved to put off his departure. The addition of an ordinary sailor's cap, was the only change in Peters' morning attire. He walked up hurriedly to Willy, and drawing him apart, gave him the letter he had promised to bring, saying he had addressed it to Squire Ashley, not to Mrs. Holdness.

He looked a little surprised when Willy, eagerly clasping his hand, said, with tears brimming into his eyes—

"Oh, sir, if I could serve you any way, let me do it!"

He looked inquiringly at him, and after a moment answered gently and sadly—

"You can easily serve me, dear lad. In all your accounts of this day's visit keep me—your memory of me—your kindly thoughts of me, deep in your own secret mind, and don't share your acquaintance with Peters with any other living being! In doing this you will greatly serve me, and need not forget me. Who knows? Some day we may meet again. Good-bye."

With a softened grateful look from those eyes that always seemed to mock at their own sadness, he grasped Willy's hand in farewell, and walked quickly away.

Willy took his place on the coach, feeling as if life certainly had some very trying phases, and watching as long as he could through his misty sight the tall strong figure retreating along the narrow street.

As for Peters, he slackened his pace as he

left the more frequented thoroughfares, and directed his way beyond human habitations, to a solitary and picturesque inlet by the sea. It was a miniature bay, with two long rocky arms stretching towards each other right and left ; but the waters they enclosed were deep and treacherous. To-night, as they gently came and went on the sands, nothing on their surface told of the jagged points beneath, only slightly visible at low tide ; but the secret had been discovered, and no sail or oar ever broke its stillness.

Peters sauntered to the further end, as if he knew the haunt, and seated himself on a smooth flat rock that might almost have been made to order as a resting-place. He looked towards the moving lights in the harbour, the smoke that rose from the busy town, and at the restless waters lying beneath the cloudless sky,—the calm full moon slowly following the greater light, far above all tumults and passions, all baseness and vileness of this lower sphere. A bitter

humility had possessed his spirit all day, a sense of utter failure, and Willy's demeanour at parting had softened him more than he cared to acknowledge, even to himself. He had come into this solitude burdened with that voiceless cry of a craving and unsatisfied soul. Oh, the purity and peace above him there! Alas! the failure and the folly all round him here!

Across the stillness came the evening chime, calling all good Christians to the vesper service. That had always had a special message for him. Many a time—in many a mood, its voice had spoken, and now its spell checked the hopeless moan that was trembling on his lips.

He rose and paced the little strip of shining sand, and, like the imperial sage of old, he called up his “daemon”* to talk it out with him. His past life came up in review. The hard fate, the temptation, the

* *δαίμων*, spirit, genius (Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Socrates, etc.).

failure. The brief time, heyday of youth and love, when all was good and pure, all possible and attainable, because one face was fair! And then, the bowed idol, the fair face void of the innocence it feigned, and the human soul cut adrift to weather the storm without an anchor. Still that bell had sounded in his ears; he knew the people were going in solemn hush to kneel and raise their hearts in joy or in sorrow to the Creator of their being. He could not join their simple faith and bend the knee with them; but he remembered once, so long, so long ago, at the knee of one who was to him a pure and unsullied memory, he had breathed the words—

“Though He slay me, yet will I trust in Him.”

And this man, bowed down and desperate a moment before, spoke out to the spirit he had invoked.

“Yes,” he said. “Thank Him, I can say it still, and in my lowest depths of despair,

when I and my inner voice hold commune together, I know that all of evil is my own holding, my own falling. I can see through my misty creed the goodness and the love, and confess the hidden purpose—but my own sins and backslidings shut out the light. For all that, I do take, and I will take, all good that comes to me; the hope that is my guide, the trust of my friend, the power I have of helping others sometimes, the chances that have been given me, the enjoyment of all that is beautiful in this created world, the moonlight on the waves, even the darkness brooding over the earth, that brings to so many rest and strength for daily labour—all, all, I take, as a whisper of that Love that slays in mercy! But, ah, spirit of mine, what a long way are we from our goal! And how many stripes we need before we may be perfected. So—we had better get home and give poor Ben his medicine.”

He stopped in his rapid pacing to and

fro. He stretched himself, and drew a long breath, like one preparing for a race—a breath that had the echo of a moan. Nay, more, the wail of

“An infant crying for the light,
And with no language but a cry.”

And then he walked briskly back to the
“Ships’ Inn Quay” and his sick friend.





CHAPTER VII.

TRIED BUT TRUE.

THE coach made a shorter stay than usual at Forminster that journey, and Willy had only a hasty interview with his friend the ostler. He heard, however, that Phillips was alive, and even a shade better, and the man said friends had arrived to look after him. With this bald news he was forced to be content.

On arriving at Nether Melcombe, Mr. Cochrane met him with a message from Mr. Ashley, asking him, if he felt equal to it, to come straight on (after a good meal, which had been ordered at the inn), and

from Wetherbury to take the quickest means of getting to Long Dene.

So Willy, feeling almost as if he had been lagging, because his thoughts had so wandered from the main point, once more took his seat upon the coach, and rode out of Nether Melcombe, with perhaps just the glimmering of an idea that, in the eyes of his townsmen, he must look something like the man whom the king delighted to honour. So he did in the eyes of Archie, the poor "softy," who used to run about the church square ready to hold a horse, or perform any simple errand for a copper. Archie stood on the edge of the pavement, and tossed his cap in air with delight to see the kind lad, who always had a gentle word for him and often a gift of more practical value, riding up on high, "just like to gentry folk."

Mr. Ashley, in passing through Wetherbury, had also expressed his wishes to the proprietor of the inn regarding a young

messenger of importance whom he was expecting. So here again Willy found himself a person of note. Everything that The Bear Inn had to offer was placed at his disposal ; but he refused all, and only asked to be put at once on his way to Long Dene.

Mr. Ingram declared his intention of driving him out in his own cart, and disappeared to make the necessary arrangements.

Willy stood at the door, his carpet bag in his hand, when a chariot drove up to the inn. On the box beside the driver sat a boy of fifteen, who had evidently taken a lift. He and the driver were indulging in some excellent joke, for their laughter was excessive.

Its inappropriate rudeness struck Willy with surprise, when he perceived that the occupant was a lady. A handsome and well-dressed lady, too, with flashing eyes and commanding figure. The boy on the box scrambled down, and leered with vulgar

expression at the lady inside, without offering to open the door. This politeness Willy, with natural impulse, stepped forward to perform. As the lady emerged, the urchin advanced yet nearer, and in an insolent and jeering tone, pushing his face almost into hers, exclaimed—

“Bain’t un served out?”

She stopped in fury. Willy aimed a blow at her insulter, who dodged under his arm, and ran round to the other side of the carriage.

It was the impulse of a moment to place his bag in her hand and run to collar the boy and box his ears, and return to the steps of the inn, where the lady stood. She gave him back his property with a short “Thank you,” and went into the house.

The lad was the knife-boy’s youngest brother, the handsome lady was Lizzie Moore, the carpet bag was Willy’s carpet bag, and in it lay Ben Josephs’ packet!

This is human life. Below our feet the

snares we just escape—unknowingly. Above our heads the anchor ropes we leave behind—unknowingly. How little, in that brief moment, did Lizzie Moore suspect she was almost touching the wreck of her great scheme—and as little did Willy suspect that the precious document, given by Peters, lay so near to the hand of that woman, whose witchcraft he had mentioned with such bitter scorn !

* * * * *

“Have you shown her my marriage lines ?”

In the terrible silence which had succeeded the noisy tumult in the outer hall these words rang out in Letty's ears. So still she stood, as if rooted to the ground ; so pale, so fierce, that those around her dared not speak.

At last the little old lady on the couch rose trembling from her place, and said in a broken voice, as she raised the passive hand and pressed it affectionately in her own—

“My dear! My dear! it breaks our hearts to see you look like that.”

Letty gave a quick movement of impatience; then, gently disengaging her hand, laughed bitterly.

“Does it?” she said. “We ought not to have hearts; it is inconvenient.” Then, turning to Lord Mortlands, abruptly added, “You have *not* shown it to me. Is there such a document?”

Her father stood beside her. She did not look at him, nor did he dare by word or tender gesture to disturb her dreadful calm.

“Hide nothing,” he said; “it is best to tell her all before we leave this room.”

This time Lord Mortlands left no shreds of concealment over the naked facts, even laying before the squire, Lennard Wilmot’s damning testimony.

“And now,” Letty said; “you all believe that I am not his wife—and that my child—Oh, God give me strength to bear it a little

longer!" and with a shudder she hid her face from the light once more.

"There, cry, my dear, do cry, it will do you good!" Lady Mortlands said in a quavering voice, hardly reasoning from experience. Certainly that fountain of relief had been flowing pretty freely for her during her last unhappy week at Long Dene, and even now the tears rushed out of her kind eyes, as love and sorrow, pity and condemnation, struggled for mastery within her heart.

A very stern condemnation was shaping itself in Lord Mortlands' mind, and every moment that he stood in that suffering presence, his sorrow for the son upstairs was obliterated by his keen indignation for the evil that had been wrought on those before him. He bent and kissed his daughter-in-law.

"My child," he said, "he is not worthy of your love. You must harden your gentle heart, and think only of that; he is not worthy."

She lifted her head, and looked sadly round.

"I am afraid I cannot deal so abruptly with my life as that. If ever human being could be helped by human love, he needs it now. He may deserve your bitter blame—he does—but—knowing all I know, I cannot believe all that now seems against him—and, true or untrue, *my* place is by his side. To whom otherwise should I belong?"

She pressed her throbbing temples between her hands.

"I feel ill," she said. "I must sleep for some hours. I would like to see Dr. Slade in my own room; and, father, if Willy Downs comes, do not awake me."

Shortly afterwards the squire, entering her room in his stocking soles, was relieved to hear her soft and regular breathing. It procured for a few hours at least rest and oblivion to his brave true-hearted child.

Could it indeed be his little Letty who lay

there in that heavy unnatural slumber, with a life so wrecked and pitiful before her that he almost questioned the mercy of her awakening to the trials she had to bear?





CHAPTER VIII.

THE LIGHT BREAKS, BUT MORE CLOUDS
GATHER.

IT was near noon the next day. Letty still lay in the merciful slumber that Dr. Slade's professional skill had obtained for her, and the little man had taken up his position in the library, so that, to use his own language, "her awakening might be skilfully met, and her overtaxed frame, with the inner force that dwelt in it, be gently renovated to meet any further excitement that might arise." Here he and Lady Mortlands were having a long and desultory talk on themes medical, such as elderly women mostly enjoy, and elderly medicos

delight in, especially when shared by ladies of quality.

The squire sat alone in the smoking-room, with the long-looked-for packet in his hand.

His thoughts were busy with the past, the present, and the future. Recollections of things, that seemed to have no bearing on the immediate question in hand, intruded in a persistent manner, almost as if the papers in his clasp were a magnet so to draw them. There was a moisture in his eyes, and the irrelevant words that came from his lips in a tender and caressing tone were, "My poor lad! What would I not give to have him with me now?"

Willy, on arrival, had been well looked after in the housekeeper's room. Civilities on all sides were quite overwhelming. He might have been Solomon himself, to judge by the intense interest and attention with which every one listened to the utterances that could be extracted from him. At first

these were very few, and very cautious, but the cheer was grateful to his wearied humanity, the housekeeper deferential and kind, and Mr. Gray himself took a fatherly interest in his welfare.

“ Really, now ! Had he known Mistress Holdness all her life ? And how had he travelled ? ”

“ There ! it wur by the coach, to be sure ; and they’d be bound Squire Ashley’s lady wur the right sort ! ” and so on.

Such remarks loosed the floodgates, and Willy was transformed into an enthusiastic orator.

Then came the opportunity for wily diplomacy on the part of a child of that well-known lady, who was herself so fatally beguiled, and who left the execution of her revenge as a legacy to all her daughters.

A little sour-visaged maid sat at her needlework in the window, glancing up keenly at times, and listening to all without saying much. But now, as it grew dark,

she rose, and shaking out the dusters she had been hemming, preparatory to folding them up, gave a deep sigh, and slowly nodded her head.

“Dear, dear, dear!” she said sadly; “it would draw tears from a stone to think our sweet lady has no right or title to name or place, and her babe, as you may say, no father!”

That did it. The fish rose to the bait in one impulsive moment.

“No one dare talk like that. I had it from those who know. Your mistress *has* the right, and she alone.”

And as Willy, with a flush upon his handsome face, spoke these words—feeling he could do no less—yet wishing he had received authority to do so much, all the servants in Long Dene knew, that the squire’s young friend had brought good tidings, and, secure of the great and welcome fact, set the ball of news rolling, gathering up its ragged and incorrect moss of imaginary

details in the loose and infirm way, such a wandering body is bound to do.

With respect to the letters, Mr. Ashley and Lord Mortlands both felt that the relief was far from being so complete as they could wish. There was nothing to exonerate Stephen from blame ; and, morally, his position remained as before ; while the edge of their just wrath was blunted in reference to the woman herself, who was the source of all the trouble.

There was a short letter addressed to "The Honoured Lady," telling her, "The certificate which would be produced was quite useless, as any attempt to verify it would prove." And for Mr. Ashley's information there was a longer and more detailed account.

"SIR,

"It is with much pain the following facts are furnished, and the writer is overwhelmed with sorrow and surprise that they should be necessary.

"Nearly five years ago Mr. Holdness had insanely resolved to marry a woman far below him in the social

grade, and in no way worthy. It was the wild freak of a college friend to let him have his way—the fact that this woman was already married having been confided to him, but in a way that he was not at liberty to divulge. A special licence, all necessary forms, an ordained clergyman (not of the highest type), were all in readiness. The marriage was to take place in a private room of the inn at Fairglade. But at the last moment the friend who had made all the arrangements, fearing lest some question might arise as to the former marriage, of which he could not be positive, had recourse to a strategem, which was only another feature of a disgraceful business. He so liberally entertained the persons whose presence was necessary, that availing himself of their foolish condition, he assumed the clerical garments and a certain disguise and read the service himself without detection. The signatures were given correctly, except that of the pretended clergyman.

“The couple, however, departed under the firm belief that the marriage had been legally performed. The next day the principal author of this drunken revel” (here some words had been written and crossed out) “was rudely shaken into another phase of existence by personal misfortunes. Before he left the place, however, he wrote a full account to be given to Mr. Holdness. The imposture was very thinly veiled, and the circumstance, with many other youthful follies, was almost forgotten. A few days ago these additional facts came to the knowledge of your present informant. It is well-known that the woman left Mr. Holdness in a very dishonest manner a few months after the mock marriage.

A relative, who wished to trace her for reasons of his own, had been travelling about as a pedlar with that intent. Accidentally he had heard the name of Holdness, the fact of his recent marriage, and had followed up this clue, in a forlorn hope of finding the person whom he sought. From the circumstances as they stood, it almost seemed as if Mr. Holdness might be remaining under the unhappy impression that his secret marriage was legally binding, and therefore the letter alluded to and entrusted to one of the witnesses, could never have been delivered."

"Wilmot, of course," Lord Mortlands said; "his habits would account for the failure there." The sense of justice troubled him sorely. He pointed to the words, "*firm belief that the marriage had been legally performed.*"

"That," he said, "is the rock on which I find continual shipwreck; nothing short of a firm belief could have had such power, and, having that belief, how could he——" and he paced thoughtfully up and down the room as he continued thinking aloud.

"Of course the knowledge is a sort of outward balm—it puts the legal aspect right ;

but supposing the former marriage were a fiction, there is deep injury to the woman. Money, most likely, will meet that obligation; but still, it is quite appalling to think of it all. Poor Stephen! he has certainly found the jewel without price; but what has she lost, when I—I his father, wish he had never been born!"

It was late in the day when Letty came down, very quiet and self-possessed, but with feverish cheeks and languid eyes. She stood by her father.

"Has it come?" she asked.

For all reply, he placed the shorter note in her hand. She read it.

"Thank God!" she said. "Oh, thank God!" and closed her eyes and trembled in every nerve.

When she looked at them again, a faint smile tried to dawn through her tears. She held out a hand to each.

"Now," she said, "I want mother, and baby. I was so afraid they might never be

able to come here to me and—Stephen——” and then she fairly broke down, and sobbed like a child. They waited silently, and when her calmness returned, she looked at the other papers on the table.

“May I see it all?” she asked.

“Well, yes—if you will—but there are chapters in a man’s life that——”

She had paused, and did not touch anything—then with almost a stern look on her white face she interrupted him.

“I may do this chapter more justice, if I read it all—knowing so much.”

They waited quietly as she went through the longer paper; the colour on her face came and went, and her brows knit in anger and indignation.

Lord Mortlands watched her furtively, expecting a fresh outburst of tears; but even the dreaded paragraph was passed over calmly, and when she had finished to the very end, Letty slowly and carefully folded the letters and laid them neatly on the table.

Then her eyes dwelt gravely on Lord Mortlands' face, and one hand stole out and took shelter in her father's clasp, as he bowed his head over it and touched it reverently with his lips.

"I know well all you would say. Don't judge too hastily. The more I think, the more I remember, the more I am prepared to maintain, against all proofs, that when Stephen asked me to marry him, he did *not* believe there was any one else. Trust him, as I do, until he can tell us. And now, please," with an attempt at her old playful, wilful manner, "mother and baby as soon as can be." She kissed them both, and left the room, Lord Mortlands following her.

The squire had risen as his daughter moved away, and he continued to stand, with his hands behind his back, in front of the fire.

How the old trouble was coming to his mind now! It had been intruding itself on him all day. He felt selfish, vexed with

himself, that his thought had turned in this direction at this moment; as if, instead of thanking God, as Letty had done, he had sought fresh cause to question the ways of Providence. He began to collect the closely written sheets of paper on the table, when, as he did so, he caught sight of a postscript he had not noticed before.

“P.S.—Should you require further witness, pray communicate your wish to Messrs. Drummond & Ibbets, Solicitors, Gray’s Inn.”

“That’s strange,” he said, half aloud, and having re-read the postscript, he turned to the two words that had been crossed out in the centre of the manuscript, trying to decipher them in a breathless and excited manner. At last he put them down, rang the bell and asked the footman to give his compliments to Mr. Downs and he would like to speak to him in the smoking-room.

Willy, who had been waiting all the morning for a summons, and was rather surprised at the delay, followed the butler

into the presence of the squire. There, instead of the dismissal, and permission to return to his granny and his work, which he expected, Mr. Ashley began to make minute inquiries regarding his interview with the man to whom he had carried his message.

“The poor man was ill in bed, sir,” Willy said. “He had the watchword fairly before he would speak.”

“Did he write all this before you?”

“Oh no.” And Willy blushed all over his neck and face like a girl, for he remembered Peters’ parting words, and felt his task was hard, almost impossible. There was nothing sly or cunning in his nature; to prevaricate, or compose word stratagems in answering the squire, would have been as difficult as to have picked his pocket. In the twinkling of an eye he recognized his position and his first duty—truth to the squire; then, as far as was consistent with this, silence, as his new friend had required it.

Squire Ashley noticed his momentary confusion with some surprise and passing wonder at its cause.

"My lad," he said, "listen to my questions, and answer fully all I ask. This fellow, Ben Josephs—about what age, and height, and figure?"

"He was in bed, sir; but he looked big and broad, as if he had been strong! Dark hair, with grey in it. About young Mr. Cochrane's age."

"Was he alone? Had he a wife and family?"

"I saw no family in the house, but—he was not alone. He had another man with him."

The squire looked up quickly.

"Another man? What was he like?"

"Tall and thin, with blue eyes and fair hair; younger than the other."

"Did he speak at all?"

"Oh yes, he said his friend was ill, so to save his breath he would just write it down

for him, and bring it to me before the coach started—and he did.”

“The sick man—was he like a gentle man?”

Again Willy turned crimson.

“Oh no!” he answered volubly, “not at all. It was a poor cottage in a low part of the town, where only poor fisherfolk lived, and——”

“Was his friend like a gentleman?”

“He was dressed in a common knitted sailor’s shirt, with rough trousers, and seemed to live there too.”

“That’s not what I mean. Was there anything in his look, his voice, his manner, in accord with the writing of these papers? This is the writing of a gentleman, not of a pedlar or a sailor.”

Poor Willy! he was run to earth, sure enough. The boy’s confusion was great, his hesitation undoubted; his honest face incapable of concealing his feeling, he clasped his hands tightly together.

“Oh, sir, he might have been a king in disguise! He said to ask you to forget that address as if you had never known it. And, oh! please, he said to leave him out, and say nothing about him—and I never meant to, but I was bound to answer all you asked. And there was real sorrow in his noble face, only as if he laughed at himself all through.”

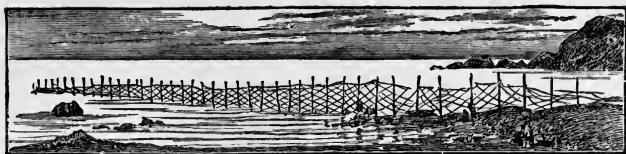
Squire Ashley walked to the window and stood there in silence. It was hard to say what feeling knocked most loudly at his beating heart. Then he returned to where Willy stood.

“I honour you, my boy,” he said, “for your struggle to keep faith. Be at ease. The stranger who wished to remain unknown shall never be made to suffer through anything that you have said concerning him. By to-morrow’s coach you and I will return home. I shall never forget the trust I have reposed in you, and how simply and honestly you have served me. I can only say, I am

grateful for your friendship, young as you are."

And then the squire shook him heartily by the hand. "Ah!" he was wont to say, long years afterward, "I have had some proud and happy moments since then, but I never recall that handshake without feeling the pride, the life, the strength, it gave me; raising me from the boy to the man, with the resolve never to say a word or do a deed that would make me feel I had been false to that honour!"





CHAPTER IX.

DROSS.

IT was market day in Wetherbury. The little town was all astir. Voices of man and beast contended for mastery, and all bucolic sounds filled the air. The sun shone fitfully upon the scene, but the rain clouds kept high, and business was being done at a very good rate.

In front of a little house of small dimensions, bearing the important name of The Rainbow, whose line of trade was disclosed by a few scattered vegetables in the window, stood the prettiest stall in the market-place. Nothing but apples were displayed thereon—but such apples!—red, yellow, russet, blue-

green, and sea-green, some smooth and shiny, some rough and cracked, with little mountains of the pale cider varieties, rising out of the brilliant groups. The next stall was smaller, and owed its colouring to ribbons and chintz and other female frippery. They were both covered, to guard against inclement weather, and the last named one was closed in at the back to keep off the dust that might injure the more delicate materials. Behind this protecting curtain was a lamp-post. A man leant against it, smoking, and watching with a lazy indifference all that was going on around him. Nearly every one else was intent on buying or selling, or gleaning information of all sorts from his neighbours ; but this individual seemed to have no business. The looks cast upon him by those who had time to think of any thing beyond what they had in hand, were evidently expressive of inquiry, and might be translated, "Who in the world are you?"

He was worth a look. His bronzed face

was well shaped and well featured, his frame powerful and strongly built, though not beyond middle height. He wore earrings in his ears, and a many-coloured scarf of foreign appearance was twisted round his body, to hold in place the loose large white nether garments, that gave him somewhat the appearance of a foreign sailor. His keen eyes, glancing about languidly enough, suddenly opened wide. The medium through which the surprise they expressed had been conveyed was his ears. He was listening.

The vendor of ribbons and the apple-woman had come to anchor in the little space between the stalls, and were gossiping. A groom riding, and leading another horse, had passed across the end of the street at the foot of the market square.

“There be Tom Ash to Long Dene, bean’t it?”

“Sure! Dear, dear, to think how often they two ha’ ridden their beasties through

this market-place, and shall we ever see un again?"

"Well, things be menden a bit. The mistress come back, and as soon as the master see her, he come to. It's witched he wur, for certain. The old lord giv' the woman the sack straight off. She be here to Wetherbury, at the inn there; and" (sinking her voice) "there's them that would gladly tear her in pieces; leastways, drown her for a witch—some for love of the young mistress, but more, belike, for spite at her ways, when she was play-acting house-keeper."

The man who was listening set his lips firmly, and a flash came from his eyes that did not give him a pleasant expression. He moved slowly from his place, sauntered round the square, and then, turning down the street on his left hand, came to a stand at the inn. For a few moments he stood irresolute, and then entered and walked up to the bar counter. It was too early in the day for

the work there to be going on very briskly. Some not very busy people had entered before him, and were talking in groups here and there on the ample sanded floor of the ante-room. The barmaid was disengaged, and could give him all her attention.

“Thank you, pretty one,” he said, after burying his face in a large pewter; “not every town in these parts can boast such fine ale, or such a lovesome lass to serve it.”

His bold glance of admiration brought the colour to the girl’s face. He leant his arm upon the counter and laughed quietly, a mirth that was reflected by his bright keen eyes.

“No need to hoist that pretty pink flag, child! I’m a married man with a family. But a girl like you is always a welcome sight in any land, and I’ve seen many.”

“You be a sailor, sure,” she said.

“I am so,” he answered; “and what you would call very much ‘at sea’ on dry land,

for I've lost my bearings. It's more than three weeks since I landed from my last voyage. I buried an old comrade at sea this journey, and he gave me a token for the woman he loved, and I have been looking, but I can't find her—that's how you make fools of us all, you know."

"Did she belong to these parts, sir?" the girl asked, her interest enlisted in this romance.

"Well, yes; and I went to the address all right, but I was just sent off with a flea in my ear. Her name was Black, and she was housekeeper at this big house, Long Dene—eh? What is it?"

For the girl started, and said "Oh!"

"Do-ee know her?"

"No, thank you," with indignation; "but I can tell you where to find her; and a bad one she be."

"True? Then I'm in luck. Poor chap! he levelled her to the angels, you see—but that's naught to me; only I would like to

keep my promise, and put my message into her own very hands."

"Oh, she's not far to seek. I'll call the missus."

Now, Mrs. Black—*alias* Lizzie Moore—was in a private sitting-room upstairs. She had established herself very comfortably at the inn, and had exerted her charms with considerable success on the landlord, the waiters, and male sex generally. In the stable department, one member of the community had been an eye-witness of her ignominious exit from the back door of Long Dene, and a leaven of mockery mingled with the pity and admiration from that quarter. The womenkind were ranged on the adverse side without any reserve, and all were on tenter hooks to know how this strange business would end.

That morning a letter had come for Mrs. Black, with the lawyer's name outside—milord's lawyer—and Mrs. Black had kept her room, and had given no opportunity of

scrutinizing her looks or expression, to see if triumph or failure were impending.

Mrs. Ingram herself came forward with great alacrity to interview the present visitor, and undertook to ascertain Mrs. Black's wishes respecting him. This lady had just breakfasted, with not so good an appetite as usual. She still sat at the table in deep thought, and there was an anxious frown upon her brows. When Mrs. Ingram knocked, she said "Come in" with the gentle voice she kept for mankind, and she heard the rustle of Mrs. Ingram's well-starched skirts with a stamp of her foot and an exclamation that certainly began with a "D." A look of determination settled on her face, as, without speaking, she regarded the intruder. The latter, from sheer force of habit, nearly gave the customary bend as she entered, but saved herself by a miracle, and in consequence displayed a stiffness of demeanour beyond her intention; for her "man" had given her orders to be "civil,

without heed to gossip, for them that paid their way had their rights as well as other folk."

In the pause that ensued Mrs. Ingram drew the conclusion that certainly triumph was not yet declared, whatever might be on the cards.

"I thought you would like me to take your instructions, ma'am. There's a man below says he has a message for the house-keeper at Long Dene."

A ray of animation suddenly lit up the unquestionably beautiful face of "Mrs. Black."

"Let him bring his message to me here," she said, and rose from her chair and stood, as if expecting Mrs. Ingram at once to depart on her errand.

The landlady of Wetherbury Inn sniffed. She re-arranged the position of two chairs near the door, daintily rubbing an imaginary speck off one of the well-polished backs.

"The man—here?" she repeated slowly, with a faint sneer in the interrogative.

"Here!" the lady in possession replied, and her dark eyes, that had revived jungle memories in the mind of Colonel Graham, dwelt steadily on the pale pink lids and faded brown orbs of the other woman. She looked at her as a tigress might look at a rabbit. Poor Mrs. Ingram succumbed, having no better artillery at hand than a more emphatic sniff and a loudly banged door.

Left alone, Lizzie stooped and looked into the keyhole, then deftly turned the key so as to defy curious eyes from the outside, and having done this, stood there with a radiant face, waiting for "the man."

Mrs. Ingram took a weak revenge.

"Here," she said aloud to the boy in the entrance hall downstairs, who was employed on odd jobs and not considered to be on the regular staff of domestics, "show this good man the door of the room where Mrs. Black be doing the lady."

Lizzie Moore, the woman, not the tigress,

stood in that room. With a joyous smile she crept into the strong arms cast about her, and was hidden in this stranger's close embrace. She raised her glorious eyes, and looking into his face, frank and innocent as a child, said—

“Oh, Matt! where have you been so long? I thought you were never coming. I am so sick of good people. I do want to talk to some one wicked like myself.”

With a glad laugh he prepared to answer her, but, roused by the first sound of his voice, she placed her hand across his mouth.

“No, no,” she whispered; “not a word here. Too much depends upon it; go as you came. Wait about the arch at the bottom of the High Street, and when I pass follow me at a distance. Don't speak until I speak to you.”

Then silently, meeting his lips once more, she pushed him from her, opened the door, and said aloud—

"Can you find your way?"

"All right, mistress," he replied in the same tone, "thank you kindly;" and, resuming his lazy indifferent manner, lounged out of Wetherbury Inn.

The baffled Mrs. Ingram emerged from the adjoining room. She had not even caught the echo of a voice.





CHAPTER X.

IN THE FOLDS OF THE SERPENT.

A SHORT time afterwards, Lizzie Moore —watching her opportunity when lunch was being served, and attention generally concentrated on the exacting frequenters of the coffee-room—also left the inn. She was closely veiled, but walking past the arch she had mentioned, saw that she was observed.

Quickening her pace, she sought the banks of the little river that, running sluggishly past the town, looking black and dull and dirty, turns round the foot of the slope called Windmill Hill, and regaining all its

lucid brightness, continues to flow through some length of green pasture land, all unshadowed under the open sky, but for a few stunted pollards that grow here and there along its banks. Against one of these dwarfed stems some practical person had placed a large flat stone. On this Lizzie Moore seated herself, unfastened her veil, and undid the strings of her bonnet. She watched the approach of the man who had followed her, and he, a picture of eager expectancy, drew near.

"Now, stop," said she, when he had come within a few paces. "We can be seen, but not heard; so keep well away, and let us talk. There is so much to say. Why on earth didn't you come sooner?"

"Sooner? Why, I have been hanging about for days. I should never have known where to go, if I hadn't heard two old women talking in the market-place. There was nothing in our post-box."

"Matt!" she started up. "Nothing! What

—not my letter?—or the money?—or the book?”

“Devil a thing! And I tell you I just made up my mind—no more games. I’ve found my witch, and I’ll carry her off, broomstick and all; so you know what to expect.”

There was a genuine woman sitting before him there. She picked up a tiny pebble from the ground and threw it at him, and with the light in her eyes that has but one interpretation, said—

“I won’t come. I don’t like you.”

He smiled back a consciousness of his power, and she added impetuously—

“I wish that cottage had no eyes. I’d punish you. I’d come and hang myself like a millstone round your neck and never leave you free again. Oh, Matt, I am sick of it; and, do you know, the bubble has burst! Quite burst! Aren’t you dying to hear how? But, oh dear, I do wonder where that money went to; the other things don’t matter now.

Fifty good gold sovereigns, Matt. Some one must have seen me, and yet—I don't think that could have been."

"It can't be helped. What book was it? You never gave me a book before!"

"Well, listen, and be serious. I want to go over the whole story quickly now—more by-and-by. Just after you left last time, Ben tracked me. It was real clever of him. He wanted you. He said he could not keep the child. We had a regular good quarrel. I gave him an address to write about it. He went off raging angry, and, as luck would have it, he met *her* in the kitchen garden. I heard him promise her a letter, and I tried to prevent her getting it; but I couldn't. Whatever was in it she ran away, and Holdness became a raving lunatic. I suppose you've heard all that?—Well, it brought all the papas and mammas and uncles and virtuous relations about my ears!"

She laughed light-heartedly as she spoke, as if the history had no tragic side.

“I had a pretty good time when I told milord I was his daughter-in-law. There was a grand old officer with him.—You would have been a little jealous if you had known how much I admired him!—But it was lovely to watch their faces when I told them about the marriage lines, and where to find them.—Don’t look so savage, and kick the whole bank into the river. If you’ll be patient, you shall go away satisfied.—You remember I told you I made him place them in his desk, and vow to keep them there? Well, the fool had done it, and there they were. Fancy that! By a little cunning—I’ll show you some day how I did it—I got hold of his diary. I knew it held that letter you wrote for me, and some other little statements that would interfere with my plans; so that evening I did my famous ghost trick, and left book, letter, and money in our post.—Oh dear! I wish the money hadn’t gone.—In the letter I told you to keep a look-out on Wetherbury Inn, and to

write to me to the post-office, 'M. Black—to be called for,' and I said [about the child. —I wonder who ever got it all?

"Only the papas had come then, but the mammas were expected; and so, very rudely, they asked me to go away. I was glad, for I was sick of shamming. I knew the money had cleared you from your trouble; but I wanted to work into something handsome and regular, just for holding my tongue. But my little plans are all spoilt.—Don't you want to know, Matt? Do you guess?"

"No, and I don't much care. If the game's up, so much the better. Don't let us play any more of that sort."

"Matt! You've been going to open-air preachings or something. Don't tell me you've dug up a conscience or anything of *that* sort. If so, I'll retire from the business."

She was silent. Her bonnet, untied at the chin, had fallen back, and was only kept up by the long ribbon-strings she was hold-

ing in her hands; her head was raised; her beautiful white throat was bare; and her pouting lips and slightly contracted brows gave her the expression of an offended, chidden child.

Matt Logan looked at her, "Go on, Liz," he said.

"Well," she continued, looking stolidly before her, "this morning I had a letter from milord's lawyer." Then suddenly she turned a beaming face upon him. "I've a mind not to tell you," she said, "I do hate you so! Ben and a friend—that you don't know—well, they have hoaxed us all along—and it never was a real marriage, only pretended, signatures and everything! There!—I thought that would bring a little excitement into your face.—And the man says my noble lord thinks something is owing to me because I have been deceived. And so he is willing to allow me eighty pounds a year, until—until—I marry. Isn't that funny? So I've *quite* made up my mind not to marry; but

I did think of going to Forminster by coach—and keeping house for—say, my uncle. Will uncle go on to Forminster to-night and be ready to meet me there?”

“How you rattle on! What a hard head you have! Is there any *heart* there? Does it beat and feel like other people’s? Lizzie, I have sinned for you—I would die for you. I could even live and endure suffering for your sake; but for all that I sometimes feel as if you were a witch body without any soul!”

“Hush!” she said; “don’t get so wild. There’s a man coming.”

As they ceased speaking, other voices rose on the still evening air—a man’s deep tones, and the treble of a little child. Lizzie turned her face from the path and looked towards the water. Matt, lying along the ground, leaned on his elbows and watched the couple approaching. A child of two or three years of age, whose imperfect prattle was an unknown tongue, to which

the man replied in short monosyllables, while he held the little hand in his and shortened his lengthy steps to suit the patter of the tiny feet. When they had passed Matt Logan sat up.

"Lizzie," he said, "look at me. Do you *never* long for the child?"

She turned her face towards him with the softness still there, but not the look he wanted to see; and she spoke in a gentle voice, but not with the feeling discernible in his own.

"Oh yes, Matt," she said, "I was forgetting. That letter was in the post this morning from Ben. It said that the child would travel to Wetherbury on Friday in charge of the guard, who had money to see that it was cared for until claimed. Friday? why, that's *to-day*! Good gracious! I must call it my sister's child, and take it with me. I hope it won't cry—children mostly do."

Logan rose, and walked over to where

she sat. He put his hand on her shoulder, and she leant her cheek against it caressingly, and said in a dreamy voice—

“They’ll see us, Matt.”

“What if they do?”

“Well, it might cost eighty pounds a year.”

“Oh, damn the money!” he answered hotly; “we’ve done enough for money, and lost more than we have gained. Don’t you think, my girl, that it might bring us real happiness now to turn over a new leaf for the boy’s sake? We are well out of that business, and who knows——”

She looked up at him in a kind of dumb despair.

“Oh, Matt! whatever is the matter with you?”

“I hardly know,” he answered hoarsely; “the sight of that child with its father, I suppose. I felt I should like to change with him, and settle down quiet and respectable like that——*now*.”

Lizzie shook her head slowly.

"We could not do it, Matt; it would be so dreadfully dull."

She stood up beside him, her eyes were looking into his, and her hand stole into his arm.

"I shouldn't know you good; you wouldn't be like my Matt."

He laughed bitterly, and drew himself away.

"Look out for your eighty pounds," he said. "Well, it's about time to go back. I won't fail you at Forminster. You—and the child. You'd better go on first to the town now, and I'll follow. Yes; you lead, and I'll follow. I'm a big fool, Liz. I know that's the road to the dark pit—and I'm not man enough to turn from it."

She smiled at him, a brilliant and beguiling smile, and said, as simply as a child—

"Oh, Matt, don't talk like that! You wouldn't be my man, if you left me to finish the journey alone."



CHAPTER XI.

WIDBURY AGAIN.

SARAH WATSON'S room was looking bright and cheerful, as on that previous evening when Willy did not "come home to tea." The curtains were not drawn, and a light stood on the table in the bow window, and sent its rays all down the village street. The kettle sang cheerily on the hob, and the old lady sat in patient expectation, as she had done for the last few evenings, listening for the horn that announced the arrival of the coach at Nether Melcombe, and wondering if the light of her eyes were returning to her.

Her knitting-needles worked tremulously, and her whole being was on the *qui vive*.

She heard the horn ; and, looking at her clock, still sat there timing her Willy over every inch of the road. A few minutes of margin she gave him, and then, rising with a sigh of resignation, drew the curtain and extinguished the light, and commenced her solitary meal.

This evening, however, her action was premature, and before the tea was drawn to its orthodox (but mistaken) extent, the sound of the light active young footfall fell on her ear, and her treasure was locked in her arms.

The young bird, after his first flight, felt the peace and calm of his old home with a keen enjoyment he had never before been able to realize—knowing no contrasts—and sank contentedly into the comfortable nest by the fire. He was hungry, too, and in rude health, and quite ready to do justice to all the thoughtful preparations that had been made to meet his special fancies. For a

little while he forgot his late importance, the facts stranger than fiction in which he had been taking his part, all the mad bustle and excitement of the outer world, and gave himself up to the simple joy of home-coming.

And how the old lady watched him, seeing an added charm in every well-known trait, dwelling on the music of his fresh young voice, and leaving her tea untouched in the relish of the richer feast before her.

Of course, when conversation found a hold, there was much to say about those things connected with the family at the Hall, in which all Widbury seemed to claim a personal interest. The tidings Willy brought were so far public property, that the voice of rumour could be silenced, as to the wicked schemer who had tried to wreck their dear young lady's home and happiness.

"Oh, my lad," his grandmother said, "I think the whole village wept tears of joy when she drove past the turn in the yellow chariot with the squire, and we knew she

was going back to her poor young husband. Please God he'll soon get well! What became of that dreadful woman, dear?"

"I don't know where she is, gran. Milord sent her away, but she came back, they said, and Miss Letty stood up like a queen, and ordered her out of the house. I don't know where she went to." Then, looking round with a new burst of appreciation, he added, "Oh, granny, how peaceful it is here! One could live for years, and never know there was so much sorrow in the world."

Mrs. Watson smiled sadly.

"I am afraid, my dear," she said, "there is no shelter that can keep that knowledge far from any living being. And we are so afraid of sorrow," she went on, with a philosophy she little suspected, "if we were as frightened of sin, there would not be so much of it."

"But, granny, it's not always sin that makes sorrow." And with a leap Willy's thoughts flew back to the most sorrowful

scene his eyes had ever witnessed, and suddenly he asked, "Have you seen Mrs. Phillips?"

"Seen her! Yes, poor thing! I was the only person she would see. And I was with her when she heard it. I had gone in about dark that evening, and I found her with some large-looking papers in her hand. 'Oh, Mrs. Watson,' she said, 'isn't it a pity it's Phillips's turn on duty, for he's wanted at once! Of course I'll tell you—though perhaps I oughtn't to mention it—but his uncle, his mother's own brother, died last week, and my George is a rich man now. You knew his mother was a lady, didn't you?' I said I knew there was something about it, but not to tell me any more until he gave her leave to speak. I was very glad, and spoke of the child, and how happy they would be, able to live in comfort together in their home, with no more need for him to leave her. I patted her on the shoulder, 'You'll be fat and sonsy again,'

I said, 'with a colour in your face, and a laugh in your voice, like when you lived with poor Miss Ashley at the hall.' And oh, Willy, my dear! it frightens me to remember. She flung her arms above her head, with a sort of cry, and knelt down beside me, and hid her face in my lap. 'No never, never more like that,' she said, and sobbed dreadfully.—I never knew she was so faithful to her mistress's memory.—I tried to soothe her, and said I was sorry I had opened old wounds, and did my best to comfort her. And she was quiet, and smoothed her hair, and sat on a stool by the fire just wondering and talking—and listening all the while; for she said she'd sent him a line to come if he could, and he might be back any moment. She said once she had asked him about his mother, but he had no memory of his parents. Every year since he could remember anything some lawyers used to send him money—about twenty pounds a year. Once, when

he was young, he thought he would like to thank whoever sent it, and know where it came from, and he went to the lawyers; but they laughed, and said he'd better take it while he could get it, and keep quiet, for his uncle was very peculiar. So, she said, 'he was always saying it would stop when the old man died; and after we married, we began to save.'"

Of course this new feature in the history he was so fond of speculating about, absorbed Willy's deep interest, and for some time Mrs. Watson's narrative remained at this point, because of the questions that arrested her—as to her previous knowledge and who else knew it?—and why it was he had never heard it? Mrs. Watson could only tell him that at one time, when there was a talk of Phillips's marrying the only daughter of Mr. Ince, who owned the big glove factory at Burstridge, people talked of little else. They said that the father knew all about his family and his prospects

and that was why he was willing to encourage the match. Then Miss Ince married the little red-haired squire of Banford, and the story about Phillips died out, and was forgotten when he took up with Emma Ray.

“Poor Phillips!” the boy said. “Oh, granny, to think how hard it is! They said he would never walk again. Tell me how the news came.”

“We heard the gate click while we were talking, and she stood up a changed woman. ‘It’s George,’ she said; and then her face fell. ‘That’s not his step. I fear he can’t come.’ The step was slow enough. It was the message they had sent by the coach. I had a dreadful time with her at first, and the child cried, and I was at my wit’s end, for I knew she couldn’t bear the sight of the women in the village since they came prying about the baby; and I did think she should have some one with her. But after a little she became more sensible, and then I saw what a strong resolute woman she was. I

went after breakfast next morning, for I was grieved and anxious. The cottage was clean and neat as a new pin, but no fire lit, and everything so bare and cold. My dear, you wouldn't believe it. Single-handed, through the night, she had settled everything for going away! She had seen Bob Hanmer passing, and had paid him to take her box to the coach at Melcombe. And sure enough she went, poor soul;—but I did pity her! Of course, living with Miss Ashley all those years, and doing so much for her, she must have learnt a great deal; but she had written a letter to the lawyer that any lady might have written, asking him to meet her at the hospital in Forminster, and giving the reason.

“And she's really gone? gone from the Lake Cottage? It *will* be strange to miss her in the mornings. I suppose she took the baby. Was it well? Did you see it?”

“She said it was well. She couldn't leave it; indeed, she never let it from her arms,

and it was so covered up you couldn't tell it was a baby." A little smile came over the kindly face. "Mrs. Stacy came Monday with the washing; she told our Fanny *she* didn't believe it was a baby, 'nobbut a bundle of clothes to make pretence,' and Fanny—who does enjoy a little gossip, Willy—looked very clever. 'It's funny she should want to hide it if it's a real baby!' So I said, 'Did you ever hear a bundle of clothes cry out?' 'No, ma'am.' 'Well,' I said, 'if that's a bundle of clothes, I *have*.' And I just gave her an extra lot of mending to keep her from gathering village chatter over the back gate."

"You cruel, hard-hearted grandmother!" Willy said. "I'm sure you took half away again to do it yourself, and sent her out for a little walk to see her mother." He stooped and kissed the dear old face, and thought there was a wistful anxiety not always there, in the eyes that often filled with tears when they looked at him.

Then Fanny came in to clear away the tea, and they sat silently until she had finished her coming and going, and had brushed up the hearth, and lit Master Willy's candles, and put the big paper-cutter beside him and done all she was expected to do, and more, without a reminder. There was scathing reproof in the last swing of her skirt, if they had but known it, as she finally closed the door and rustling along the passage thumped the tray upon the dresser. She sat down to her work by the kitchen table with a pout on her fat little face, and blowing vigorously into her thimble, fixed it tight on her finger, with an impatient tap on the lid of her workbox.

"I bean't no wiser nor if I'd left thic tea till midnight.—I wish I'd done it, too. But there; I don't wash one o' they cups and plates to-night. I'm no black nigger that they should rest dumb before me!" And lashing herself into a fury over her wrongs, Fanny viciously, and of malice pre-

pense, began to bungle over her young master's socks, leaving various places in the heel unnecessarily bumpy. Who knows how many *mauvais quart d'heures* may proceed from an offence as unintentionally given!

Meanwhile Mrs. Watson had taken up her knitting, and Willy, as usual, was deep in his book; the rapid click of the needles, and the ticking of the clock, was all that broke the silence. Every now and then the old granny would steal a look at her darling, and then avert the glance with a smothered sigh. At last the boy came to an uncut page, and stopped to look round for the paper-knife, which Fanny had not omitted to place beside him—this time.

"Willy," Mrs. Watson said, speaking reluctantly as it were.

"Yes, gran?" And with the prompting of true politeness, which had a more healthy growth in family circles then than now, he put down his book, and stood up prepared to talk if she wished it.

"Your Aunt Jordan has been here very often since you went. She stayed a long time to-day."

"Did she bring little Amy with her?"

"No; she wanted to talk to me on business."

"Business! granny? I won't have you talked to about business, if it makes you speak sadly and look so tired."

"Then don't look at me, darling, for I am going to talk business to you; and you must not speak one word until I've finished, and not then, unless I tell you. Your Uncle Francis sent her quite a bundle of papers from India by this last mail; she called them 'statements.' Now, you know, Willy dear, he's a very rich man, but he has no son."

Here an inkling of what was coming flashed across Willy, but he did not disobey orders, only drew out a small stool which was the first fireside chair he could remember, and putting it into its old accustomed place, sat down and leant against her knees.

“He wants to adopt you into that place, and to call the Calcutta firm Jordan and Downs. He says you could come now, and learn all about it, and directly you are of age he'll put you in as partner, with one-third of the profits to begin with. You'll have great luxuries, and a gay life, with carriages and horses, and your own people about you, and plenty of company. It is such a chance, dear, so rightly placed before you, as comes to very few. There! don't turn round yet. She is coming to speak to-morrow herself, and I promised I'd say no word for or against, and not let you try to argue the question. After that, you're to have a whole week to think it over, and read the papers, and show them to Mr. Cochrane and the squire, or any one you like. There, now! I've done my share; so not another word about it.”

For a few moments she sat quietly stroking the hair from his broad white forehead, with the “motion of a hidden fire

trembling in her breast." Then suddenly starting, as if the ghost of the yawning Fanny had jogged her elbow, she cried—

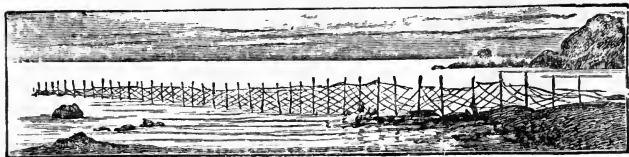
"Oh dear, dear ; how late it is ! Ring the bell." Willy rang the bell, then lifted the old Bible from the shelf, and placing it before her on the table, opened at the place where the marker lay—a marker worked by his mother when a girl. He had always felt it was a kind of privilege to touch it, and for many a year he had watched its progress through the big book and back again to the beginning, noting wistfully how far it travelled in the school times, while its holiday journey was so short !

The old lady's voice trembled a little as she read how the child Samuel was called of God, and when she came to the words, "Thou shalt say, Speak, Lord ; for thy servant heareth——" she stopped abruptly and closed the book ; then kneeling, prayed the simple prayer, "Lighten our darkness, O Lord ; and defend us from all perils." She

rose very calm and quiet, and as usual answered, "Good night, Fanny," when that young woman, having brought in the candles, gave her bow and departed ; but she had not dared to look her grandson in the face.

"Granny," he said, and his voice was clear and confident and sounded more like a man than ever before, "granny, last time you read Samuel was in the summer holidays, years and years ago, and you promised me when I was twenty years old I should always read prayers and save your old eyes, and I intend to keep you to your word."





CHAPTER XII.

CROSS-ROADS.

WILLY was not, as a rule, an early riser; people of that temperament seldom are. Sometimes they have a dream to finish before they quite open their eyes to the prosaic world. Sometimes, when they do look out of their sleepy lids, the shadow of a fluttering leaf upon the blind, the morning music of some busy sparrow in the eaves, or the gentle stir of the wind among the branches, awakens a train of thought that promotes inaction, and often as not results in being late for breakfast. This morning the very peace and stillness seemed to waken our dreamer up, and the reflected brilliance

of the rising sun, lighting up the room, lent its aid.

When he had left his granny the night before, kissing her with a fervent tenderness, which was meant to say all that he was forbidden to utter, he had shut his door and drawn up his blind. It was a clear and frosty night, there was no moon, only "the light of stars;" but, as was his frequent custom, he snuffed out the candle, and undressed by the dim light.

The fact that he had determined to put aside his aunt's proposal by no means implied that it had roused in him an antagonistic principle. On the contrary, he was much attracted by it. But the lad had an unselfish nature, not acquired by discipline or inculcated by precept, but inherent in his very being. He also had, as we have before said, that strange faculty for following out the working of the minds of others, and, as it were, feeling with them even when he did not feel for them.

On this occasion, sitting by his grandmother's knee, and listening to her quiet voice, he had gone outside Willy Downs altogether. He had put himself into her place when Mrs. Jordan made the first proposal; had seen the calm countenance and resigned manner, even more calm and more resigned from the contrast; he had felt the sudden throb of sorrow at the thought of parting, laid aside with firm determination, so that nothing of self should stand between her darling and his prosperity. And still as she spoke, he felt with her the silent anguish in her heart, the brave resolve that no tremor in her voice, no tears in her old eyes, should hinder him from seeing all the advantages that were placed within his reach.

Then he was Willy Downs again. One comprehensive picture of his life passed before him, and with it the quick resolve that no matter how brilliant a meteor gleamed to dazzle, nothing would induce

him to cast a shadow on the remaining days of his loving, faithful granny.

On this he had quite determined, but nevertheless, when he shut himself off from candlelight, and looked out upon the unknown mysteries brightening that steadfast kingdom, that has watched, unchanging in itself, the myriad cycles of our baby world, the longing for other unknown, but not quite unattainable things, came gliding into his mind, until he almost wished that he could see the star in the east, and be told to follow it. He got into bed, leaving the blind up,—covering himself warmly, for it was very cold,—and looking out long into the night. He saw no star in the east, no poetical argument of the sort to encourage his fancy, only the pale steady gaze of that old conservative that stands unmoving in the tip of the Little Bear's tail.

It was partly the open blind, and the brightness it admitted, that roused him up next morning. The sky was shot with pink

and yellow, a silver brilliance rested on the world, the clinging mists had frozen to the trees, and the sparrow was not up and doing, for the early worm was much too stiff to venture out as yet.

Willy had gone to sleep with a hundred fancies in his head, but the one most persistent of all, was the Eastern picture grandly drawn by a master hand. To a country mind at this period, the East was India, and India was the East—it was all the same.

“The boy was sprung to manhood ; in the wilds
Of fiery climes he made himself a home,
And his soul drank their sunbeams. . . .

. he lay
Reposing from the noontide sultriness,
Couched among fallen column in the shade
Of ruined walks, that had survived the names
Of those who reared them. . . .

.
And they were canopied by the blue sky
So cloudless, clear, and purely beautiful,
That God alone was to be seen in heaven.”

The beautiful words came back to him

now, but not with the same power. Somehow the different kind of beauty round him, though so well-known and familiar, drew him to its arms, and smote him with the love of home. He no longer yearned to "drink sunbeams."

He dressed, and stole out quietly. He took a brisk walk up the hill, and round the church, and along the lanes outside the Shirley coverts. The roadway was hard, strewn with fallen leaves, all shining with the gems that come and go with a breath, yet bear, in their minutest form, that regular unerring beauty and proportion which is the foundation of human art. The Eastern glamour of the night before had faded,—all melancholy questions crept into the background for a time,—his soul sang for joy! He gathered bunches of berries and leaves, tinted bright and sombre, and arranged them as he walked along. He saw the Hall in the distance, and remembered the squire had called him "friend," and then he turned

and retraced his steps by that green lane that led towards the Lake Cottage. The exercise had warmed him thoroughly, and he forgot the cold air as he stood looking down on the deserted home—remembering, pondering. Filled one moment with questioning, baffled wonder; the next absorbed in the thought of fortune's cruel caprice, in bringing a sorrow in one hand—a joy in the other. Well he knew that for that devoted woman, who would have deemed her life a slight sacrifice for one dear sake, no joy could live under the shadow of that sorrow. It was an unfinished story, it must have an end. How could he ever go away and leave it? How lose the chance of seeing Mr. Peters again? No; a thousand times no. Granny and Widbury for ever! However enticing Jordan and Downs might sound, it should not allure him.

The flowers were settled with the skill that is born of love; and when granny came down were admired through love's spectacles.

"It will give the room a pretty finish for Aunt Jordan," she said.

On going into Melcombe that day, as luck would have it, Mr. Cochrane, much pleased with the squire's frank words about his *protégé*, and supported in his own growing opinion, had a private conversation with the young man, in which he held out to him certain sure prospects in the future, and a very substantial preferment in the present; so that the clash of surrounding circumstances had raised a breeze of good fortune, and the fates seemed to be fostering the prospects of Mr. William Downs with much care.

He walked home with a buoyant step, primed to meet all arguments, and found his granny delighted at his punctuality.

The "aunt from thic gold-growing land," as Anna Birt had originally described her, was not long in following. She excited the usual stir in Widbury—by the well, and at the cottage doors; all the inhabitants agreeing "to come two days running meant summat."

Mrs. Rowton was now no longer required to lend her own pony-trap, for Mrs. Jordan had bought a pair of ponies and a basket phaeton—rather too small perhaps for her figure. She was a fine big woman, still handsome in her own style, with large brown eyes and arched brows, cartilaginous nose and full lips. She had a manner with no hesitancy in it, however embarrassing the occasion, and a voice whose modulations seemed a little out of order—not working smoothly, so that an effort to employ her low tones sounded discordant to the listener. She was not quite so brave as she looked, and her ponies had been selected as being the quietest of their race. She drove herself, and had entertained an active lad of twelve years old, the son of a labourer, to attend her. She had dressed him like a little old man, in a long coat with big buttons and a tall hat. His name was Archy Laurence, but when on duty she called him “Syce,” and gave him four shillings a week, being, she said,

just double what she gave her grooms in India. "Syce" was a funny little boy, with a very fair face, a little snub nose, and with flaxen hair. On Sundays he was off duty, and admonished to attend Sunday school. How the young humourists of the village tried to disturb his imperturbable good-nature, by joking him about his horses,—asking if he stabled them all in his hat, or in the pocket of his big coat ; and he would crinkle his little nose with laughter, and beating his palms together would say, "Show's yeere money, then," claiming the powerful argument on his side. The Sunday before, Mrs. Jordan had come upon some of these merry juveniles in the act of calling "Soyce ! Soyce !" and looking down severely as well as her ample figure would permit, had said, "No, not on Sunday ; not on Sunday ! Archie Laurence is a Christian boy ;" and had given him a sixpence as a salve, thereby strengthening his position—as having the best of it.

Mrs. Jordan had no doubt but that the golden offer made to her brother's son would be at once accepted, and drove up to Mrs. Watson's door with a magnanimous intention of disguising her triumph. The bright face with which her nephew greeted her was but the satisfactory sign she had expected.

"Well, dear," she said, almost before she had gained an entrance, "have you brought dear granny round to our opinion?"

Willy laughed.

"I haven't been allowed an opinion yet," he answered. "Granny said you told her I wasn't to talk until you came."

"Yes, so I did. I forgot."

She loosened her bonnet strings and unwound all her fur wrappings and laid them on the couch, Willy assisting. Then he went out and bade the "Syce" to take his horses to the rectory stable, where his granny's friends always had permission to put up. The two ladies had only exchanged a few polite words of ordinary meaning on

the universal topic, and to break the ice Willy on his return poked the fire into a brilliant blaze. Then the portly visitor, growing impatient for some one to begin, said in very dictatorial tones—

“Well?”

Willy felt rather shy in her large presence, and divined that his grandmother could hardly trust herself to speak. Moreover, it struck him that the controversy, if his aunt were determined on one, should not be carried on in that time and place; so he replied, with considerable diplomacy—

“I think you are very kind and wise—and most wise in promising me a week for reflection. Whichever way it ends, I hope you and Uncle Francis will let me keep my place in your love, if not in the firm. You see, Aunt Jordan, Mr. Cochrane has behaved so generously to me always, and to-day has opened out to me such a pleasant prospect in the place I hold, that I must weigh it all carefully before I can speak, and you won’t

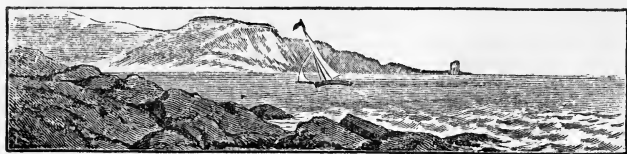
press me for an answer before that, will you? Only promise, anyway, to let me keep your love, for my own sake as well as my father's."

He held out his hand. She slapped it vigorously with her fat fingers, and looked with admiration at the speaker.

"Mr. Cochrane! My dear, it would be just throwing yourself away. Suppose you even become Mr. Cochrane himself, what would that mean? Life in a country town; a position neither fish, flesh, nor fowl. The clergyman all smiles when you gave big charities, and school feasts, and reading desks, and things;—playing whist with you, maybe,—but never asking you to dinner to meet the squire, or the visiting bishop. Just to feel yourself like a sardine between the upper and the lower.—Sometimes with a head turned to you, and sometimes a tail—never knowing what you were. Now, *there*, you'd be a merchant prince! I tell you, child, you don't know—no one in Widbury, or Nether Melcombe, or Shirley itself, for the

matter of that (except perhaps the Indian colonel and his wife), can even *think* what it is! A house in Chowringhee—which is as good as to say a palace. Balls and dinners at Government House—like going to visit the king's majesty. Riding and driving every night to hear the band play at Garden Reach. Never to think twice, but just say what you want, and you get it; and the money comes tumbling in to pay for all. And then the ladies, and the dresses, and the jewels! and to know you are a true born Briton all the time, and just walk along over the top of the whole thing! Ah——”

She leant back in her chair with a long-drawn breath, half a sigh, and half a sibilant, leaving the listeners overwhelmed by her eloquence. But, in spite of that, Willy kept to his first resolve, and exacted one week's reprieve before giving a final answer.



CHAPTER XIII.

VIGNETTES.

THERE were signs of flitting about the little cottage on the Ships' Inn Quay, where Willy had held his famous interview. Straw and paper lying about, marks of wheels, chips of old broken deal cases, and divers refuse.

The same woman with the broom was on the spot, but the implement seemed carried more as a badge of office, than for practical application.

Peters stood in the doorway of a now empty house; he was counting some money into his hand.

“Well, Mrs. Murphy,” he said, “we’d better settle our account, and then you can go to your tea. I’ll lock the door and leave you the key as I pass.”

“Thank ’ee, sir, thank ’ee. I be sure it’s naught but pleasure to do the bidding of such like, and I wish you all the luck in the world, and the blessing of Heaven for your kindness to a lone widow,” and here pearly drops began to fall. “It’s a real trouble to me to think maybe I’ll never see ’ee again—and the poor man, and the child—it’s like losing a little family; and please, sir, if I may make so bold, has the child got safely to his journey’s end?”

“Oh yes, Mrs. Murphy,” Peters answered. “I had a good talk with the guard about him. He said a beautiful lady met the boy, and thanked him with tears in her eyes for taking care of the child; and, would you believe it?—that child cried and wanted to stay with the guard.”

“Bless his little heart!” said the woman,

with her apron in the corner of her eye ; “ he always wur a bit strange.”

“ Oh, I dare say he has come to his senses by now !—and the poor sick man has got safely to his quarters in the warm south. Perhaps we’ll come and see you again,—but I won’t keep you longer now. You’ve left the damaged chair, haven’t you ? I’ll just have a last smoke before I start. That’s my dish of tea, you know.”

He watched her roundabout figure as she walked away to the old house, where the sign of the Ships’ Inn gaily flaunted, and in spite of himself, he smiled to think it was almost with a touch of sentiment that he had regarded that familiar and unlovely form so retreating for the last time.

Then he looked toward the silent deserted old quay. No doubt in its day it had known busy and exciting scenes—daring men and anxious women ;—law defied, and sometimes avenged. Only poor fishermen now brought their small crafts to the steps of the old

pier. At this hour all the boats were out, and silence and loneliness reigned over the deserted spot.

Slowly and thoughtfully he filled his pipe and lit it, and leaning back in the "damaged chair" watched the magic, soothing, floating clouds, comforting companions of many a troubled hour.

Through many a maze of thought, by strange and unintentional sequences, his ideas at last concentrated on a letter in his pocket. He took it out with a softened expression and read it over.

"If my surmise is correct, and I have rightly guessed who is the writer of that letter that purported to come from a pedlar, I should be glad to have some tidings. I should not have regarded my idea as more than a fancy, but that the address given bore out my suspicions. The lad who carried the message was most loyal in his efforts to evade my questions.

"I am greatly moved by this; deeply touched by the thought that one for whom I have mourned as for a dear son, is still alive and estranged from me! In spite of the circumstances that point to it, I can hardly believe such a thing to be possible, nor do I think anything can justify your concealing the fact. Remember, I have

some right to speak. My affection for your dear mother—her confidence in me—warrant my doing so. You must know you have a friend. Why have you turned from him? I have told no one as yet of my suspicions. I will never tell *her* of your unhappy share in this sad business. Boy, we have wanted you so. Come back to us."

His face was white and set and stern, and great drops stood on his forehead. Then he rose and took one turn along the quay, and ending with a stamp of determination and a low laugh, he said—

"There are lots of specifics for indigestion. I wish some one could invent a good receipt for petrification."

He restored the letter to its place in the pocket-book from which he had taken it.

"Kind heart," he said. "Please God, circumstances may wean his mind from any necessity for remembering me."

Sitting in the doorway of the empty cottage on the desolate quay, with the sound of great waves now and again gently breaking against the sturdy walls, with which

they had waged their winter wars through many a generation, he reviewed his life, his past actions and present responsibilities, raised by the perusal of the letter he carried.

His first and all-pervading memory was his beautiful, delicate, and devoted mother. He knew that some of the tenderness he felt for the writer of the letter was due to the allusion it contained. In contrast to that gentle picture came the stern dark face of his father, the man whose very religion was the repression of natural feeling, the righteousness of gloom. Like clear vignettes on the background of the past, certain scenes made up his life's story.

The interview with his father, when he had been directed, in scriptural phrase, to shape his course towards the family living in a neighbouring parish.

His college days, his poetry, his enthusiasm, his ideal of woman, his worship of beauty, and the short, sharp blow that taught him

in what exquisite and perfect seeming the blackest souls may dwell.

Then the sudden summons, the hurried journey, the darkened windows of that room where the loving eyes had ever watched his coming. The pale worn face that turned from all to look at him, the whispered blessing and the hot wasted hand that clasped his with feeble pressure, and never loosed its hold until it lay inert and cold and lifeless in his own. The desolation and the blank that never, never, on this wide earth, could be so filled again.

After that, shadows. Shadows falling over all his youth, and through the shadows mad wild glimpses of a reckless and miserable life; rumours that reached his father's ears, with distorted truths from a lying villain's tongue!

He could almost hear the voice and the words that had left him homeless. Cruel words that never could be unsaid; and father and son henceforward dead to each

other. Oh, that day ! The pitiless rain, the howling wind, the long wandering through the dark night.

He remembered as he saw it then, the dawn breaking over the roofs and spires ; he could recall how, as he stood on the bridge by the dark flowing river, a wave of utter despair had overwhelmed him. Would morning after morning break and find him as now ? Madness in the thought ; and he had plunged to seek oblivion in the swift stream below. His last thought—my mother knows ;—and then, as the waters closed over him, he seemed to sleep and dream—a dream that had never left him. He saw his mother's face with tearful eyes, weeping that his sin in seeking self-destruction was a barrier that stood between them for ever and ever more ; and he reached out his hands, and said, “ I will go back and be worthier, so I find you again ; ”—but a great sword barred the way, and he fell prostrate on his face, while voices round him echoed

in his ears, "redeem the time, redeem the time."

A calm fell on him, and something cool and soothing touched his forehead, and he opened his eyes and saw his faithful servant bending over him. Then it was the grateful devotion of Moore had culminated. Cunningly following his master's footsteps through the wild day and the dark night when he left his home; listening unseen to the furious sentences he flung out upon the darkness, thinking himself alone; divining the madness that had seized him, and straining every nerve in readiness to avert the frantic end he rightly judged his poor young master to be approaching, the strong arm of Ben Moore had saved him from the doom he sought.

So far along the lines of his past days Peters' memory had travelled, and with the thought of the man who had saved his life, and nursed him back through a long illness to health and sanity, came the recollection

that he was sitting in an empty house, and had better make a start for his next camping-ground. The sun had set, but clear moonlight was before him ; he could think as he walked along. He strapped a small leather box across his shoulders, slapped his numerous pockets to see if they were furnished with their right contents, looked at his pipe, hesitated, then with a relenting smile refilled it. He put on his cap, and locking the door, walked quickly to the Ships' Inn. Mrs. Murphy was not visible, so he went in quietly, hung the key in its accustomed place, and feeling thankful to be spared more parting lamentations, continued his solitary journey.

The thread of his broken reflections had to be resumed, for that letter, so tenderly folded away, was lying against his heart with a certain pressure, and demanded a reply.



CHAPTER XIV.

PETERS.

WHEN Robert Ashley had left the room where his sleeping mother lay, and bowed before that great law which decreed this irrevocable doom, his one great strain had been to forget the grave with its decaying dust, and still to bear with him that beloved but invisible presence, as if of a spirit freed from darkness and narrow bonds, yet clinging to the love which had been so large a portion of its earthly life.

The idea was strongly fixed, and its very intensity, which might have borne in unsympathetic minds the name of "insanity," had the power to keep him calm and

rational and self-controlled in other ways. In his solitary hours he still held commune with her, as if she could see and know not only the present but all the circumstances of his past wild career.

Of course he had never reasoned about it. He never questioned his endowment of a human soul with divine privileges. He wanted just to hold to the fact of her nearness, only with a vivid consciousness of the gulf that still divides good from evil. In fact, on that one point he was unreasoning and mentally deranged.

On that fatal morning in his father's room she had been with him. The words spoken, the insult offered, was to him as if the man with his heavy hand had struck his mother ; and frenzy had intervened.

During the long hours of delirium that had followed his rescue, his ravings had pretty well laid the state of his affairs before Moore's half-enlightened mind, and awoke in that honest being a determination, at all

hazards, to conceal him from his father, and elude pursuit and inquiry. In this he had succeeded with a cunning and an ingenuity that seemed almost inspired.

When he had first looked about him with a calm intelligent air, and raised his head from his pillow, poor Robert smote feebly on that left side of his skeleton—

“Why does it thump so?” he said; “this thing! It has turned into a stone, and ought to know it.”

And, again, when Moore had addressed him by his name, “Mr. Ashley, sir,” for one instant the old excitement had flashed into his master’s eyes, but soon weakness—or strength—put out the fire, and, speaking in the old light vein, he said—

“Excuse me, my good friend, for the future call me—Peters. Yes, Peter was a rock—so you may say Peters—*I* am Peters. That man you have just mentioned has gone away—— You understand? This man here—Peters—is your good friend. He is

a son of the people. They shall share his fortunes, and have his society. He will live among them, and know no other kith or kin—except you. And you,” he added, with his queer laugh, “you are another alien. Benjamin was about the most inappropriate title that could have been selected by Fate. However, you may retain it, in its short form, but add to it Joseph—*he* was sold by his brethren. Ben Joseph sounds rather Jewish, doesn’t it? Never mind, your features are quite sufficiently contradictory of that view.”

The line of demarcation between sanity and insanity Moore had never been able to define. It seemed to him, for many a long day, that his poor master was suffering from delusions, which had been so evidently produced by his natural guardian, that the longer he was kept out of sight the better. It will be remembered he had never been to Shirley, or seen the squire, or “Miss Letty.”

Even after health and strength were established these delusions still remained. A law had been very plainly laid down for Moore's observance. Henceforth, everything in the past was to be as though it had never been. No old name of place or person was to pass their lips, either in talking to each other or to strangers; and the long and stern oration in which these orders had been given ended with—"Or else——" and an abrupt silence that said more than words. Then Ben Joseph, though he recognized it as a delusion, gave it his faithful adherence, and found the victim of it so sane and like his old self in other ways, that sometimes he almost wondered who was the madman.

So it continued to be Peters' phantasy; he was without a home, without a family, lingering here and there, where he might do something to help another wayfarer on life's journey, repressing with determined hand any natural tenderness of memory, any link

that was pleasant to recall, except, that one for whose dear sake he was trying to "redeem the time." She was not with him now. That dreadful scene, that fatal plunge, had driven her away from the old nearness; but the hope shone, though like a distant star, through trial and temptation. If he could stand firm in life's battle, he knew she would come to him again. He had no luxurious habits of the rich, he always journeyed on foot, he dressed as the poor man dresses. He did not, however, mortify the flesh by practising unnecessary asceticism; and, remembering his proud descent, he moved among his fellows with a dignity that kept him apart, while he drew all men to him with a frank sympathy and an attracting power there was no resisting.

Unfortunately for poor Ben he was not so situated that he could put aside all his ties. His angry father, and the burden left upon his hands, recurred too frequently to his mind. So when he at last felt quite

assured that he might safely leave his charge, he started off to look after his own affairs.

His father had sold the business and the inn, and was gone no one knew where; but many voices could tell him where the poor motherless child was leading its unloved, miserable existence.

Lizzie's career was also not hidden under a bushel; and it was largely rumoured how she had beguiled a young man of high degree and run him into heavy debts, and absconded with a former lover, taking everything of value she could contrive to remove. His first impulse was to carry his news to his master, but he remembered the new law; so he returned to the quaint old fishing quarter on the south coast, taking the child with him. He arranged with Mrs. Murphy to look after it, but never let it near the cottage; and on regaining his post merely said that he had brought a motherless child, and had entrusted it to Mrs. Murphy's

care. From his childhood he had always had some disease connected with the heart, and with that brutal candour known among the poorer classes, he had been told he would "die suddent." The fact of this contingency, and the charge humanity had thrown upon his shoulders, led him first to take up the idea of travelling about as a pedlar, to try and find that evil person whose mission seemed to be, to leave a blot of sin and suffering wherever she went.

The master in the meanwhile had settled in his strange head-quarters. There, in a room of which he kept the key, and which no one entered but himself, he would spend long hours of happy life apart, and still returning from a few days' wandering, bring fresh food for his own rest and entertainment, trying to produce in bold and self-taught touches the scenes of beauty on which he looked with such loving eyes. Not figures, not humanity—but clouds and mists, and all the treasure-house of

nature's growth, maturity, and decay. He had hung outside this door the picture of a large key dripping with gore, labelled in large letters, "Blue Beard's Chamber." Mrs. Murphy was not one of Erin's daughters, in spite of her name, but working round the precincts with her broom, would smile with quite a sentimental air, and reading out the words very slowly, would add—

"Well, it do look like it—so it do; and there's a many no doubt like sister Anne, would do more nor that to see *him* coming." Which sounded as if her idea of the story was rather muddled.

The first few weeks the need of money had not been felt, for a heavily filled purse happened to be in his breeches pocket that night, when Robert Ashley left his home. When the want did arise, that which some would call the cunning or calculation of his particular madness came to his assistance. His business affairs were entirely directed by the house that had been for years in his

Suffolk grandfather's confidence, and were in no way under his father's control.

The old lawyer, who had been his grandfather's friend, was dead ; but the son, a man of George Ashley's age, and a bachelor, was reigning in his father's stead. Knowing through Ben what rumours had gone abroad since his disappearance, he was still unaware how far they had spread, but felt on pretty secure ground, being sure that time must elapse and satisfactory proofs be adduced before his living interests were interfered with. He wrote to Mr. Drummond, of Drummond and Ibbets, that he wished for a private interview with reference to the affairs of Mr. Robert Ashley. This confidential communication was signed P. Peters, and was delivered at the door as he requested permission to see the addressee.

Mr. John Drummond, now head of the firm, received him as may be imagined with some surprise. But the strange visitor never faltered, and very plainly made his proposals.

"You have seen me before, Mr. Drummond?"

"Yes, Mr. Ashley, I have."

A frown, not derived from the Suffolk family, lowered on the young man's brow.

"I am here to state a case," he said, "and throw my double person into your hands, knowing the long friendship that has bound our houses together. I have cast from me the name of Ashley, and every connection with its house. I have another ancestry, of which I am prouder than anything on earth. I own no parentage but one, and that, as you know, is only a memory."

There was a short silence; and, little as the speaker suspected it, his words awoke a keen and bitter memory in the heart of the stern business man before him, as, through the veiling years, there rose the suffering of a past time, when a stranger had come to the old home far away, and carried off the sweet maiden of the Vale Farm. There

was a ready sympathy enlisted on his client's side.

“ My reasons for taking this determination are too painful to explain. I do not know how far rumours are afloat, or what you may have heard. You see, I am still in the land of the living. Any idea to the contrary has been simply a lucky accident in helping me to keep apart. I will sign any paper that you think necessary, but I want you to pay my usual income into the London and County Bank at Bymouth, to the order of P. Peters. I do not want to embarrass you by leaving any address, but I do wish to impress upon your mind that I no longer desire to consider myself as an Ashley. I will sign before you the name I have taken so that you can verify it when you see it.”

And so this part of the business was concluded.

When Ben had returned from his last trip, wild and excited, and physically ill, Peters had been much concerned. He

would not hear him speak, and Mrs. Murphy was sent for, and a comfortable bed, and broth, and even medical advice was at once put in requisition; while poor Ben, fervently desiring to keep faith in his share of the strange treaty, yet haunted by the recollection of what he had seen, and the fear of what wickedness might be doing in the meanwhile, had hardly power to frame his tidings into words.

“Heart,” the doctor said to Peters, “and something on his mind. Make him speak.”

So Peters, looking down on the poor wreck of that once powerful man, who had given him his second chance, and turning as he often did to that soft dialect so familiar to him, said—

“What can I do for 'ee?”

“Let me speak, master,” the man eagerly replied. And thus Peters knew some spectre had risen from the past.

In confused and broken sentences the poor fellow told his tale. How he had heard

the name of Holdness, and had followed the cue. The house with its ruined wing, and the means she had used to keep a portion unmolested for her own dark purposes; and then in trembling and deadly fear, with prayers for his master's forgiveness, and ravings of the sweet face that had smiled on his recovered senses, he confessed that he had given his name, and the address that was not his to give.

His master quickly reassured him, and promised he would make it all right if they did not hear soon. Confident in the strength and wisdom in which he put his trust, in face of delusions, Ben Moore collapsed, and was only semi-conscious for some days. After Willy had come and carried back confusion into the enemy's camp, Ben recalled that a letter to "Mrs. Black, Wetherbury Post Office, kept till called for," was what Lizzie had given for an address, and there a letter was sent, and the child promptly sent after it.

Ben had now gone down into Dorset to the seaside, and every comfort arranged for him there, and to this place Peters was wending his way. Wandering under the quiet starlight, and thinking how the same rocks seemed to jut out and peril his bark wherever he steered his way, his thoughts still returned to his letter, and the love and longing that were besieging his mind. Not that he faltered on the path he had chosen; for even as natural affection drew him to the haven that seemed almost in sight, one wave in the storm of adversity rose high and barred his entrance. Better, far better, his little cousin should think of him as dead, than as the living instrument that had robbed her life of hope and happiness.





CHAPTER XV.

THE TOUCH OF A VANISHED HAND.

AT Shirley, for some time after the squire's return, things seemed much out of joint. Mrs. Ashley, drawn in both directions, had felt that Letty, Letty's household, and Letty's baby, really required her attention and presence ; and reluctantly, yet willingly, had remained a long while absent from her husband and her new-found sister. But it was quite arranged that Colonel and Mrs. Graham would spend the winter at Shirley, so she was comforted to think her vacant place was in some measure filled.

The squire, however, was miserable without his Mary ; and as for Colonel Graham,

he was making up *his* mind that life in England seemed to take a serious and care-fraught shape that it never wore in the sunny East. He wanted exercise and active bodily employment, and he and his brother-in-law together were not the most cheerful of companions. As for Mrs. Graham,—well, she had been exiled for long years; many autumns had passed by since she had watched all the characteristic scenes and changes of the falling year in her own country. Each common everyday occurrence had its charm, every hedgerow its well-remembered beauty. She would wander about in all weathers, and come home laden with many-coloured spoils, and spend happy moments arranging them about the rooms with loving, lingering touches, thinking thoughts and dreaming dreams that created a little world of her own. She never felt dull or lonely. Beautiful nature all around her was her companionship, giving joy to her sight and deep thoughts to her soul;

and when she came outside herself, she had enough to do to stir up the flagging energies of her two melancholy men companions.

With the early days of November, the colonel's thoughts and opinions underwent a considerable change. He was bound to confess that "sly Reynard" was altogether an improvement on the "jackals." What with his own horses and the other mounts at his disposal, he was happy five days out of seven. Oh, the luxurious rest after the successful run! Oh, the dinner, with an appetite that would have turned dry bread and water into ambrosia and nectar! And, then, to crown all, a night of sound and stirless slumber.

Of all the worshippers at the shrine of the Fox Moor Vale Hunt—and the devotees are not a few—none more enthusiastic or unwearied than the Indian colonel at Shirley Hall.

After dinner of an evening, when he had

gone over the day's sport with Mr. Ashley, tracing the route and learning up the geography of the county, he would become too drowsy for conversation, and the squire would leave him with his pipe, and join Mrs. Graham in the drawing-room, knowing full well that even her silent companionship was one of sympathy with the sadness of his circumstances.

On that night when Peters was walking alone with his memories under the starlit sky, Mrs. Graham, seeing that her companion was even more depressed than usual, tried to make him turn his thoughts to other subjects.

"Harry," she said, folding up her work and laying it down with a determination to try and draw his thoughts in another direction, "I have often wanted to ask you about your brother ; but, knowing all the sorrow that is round the subject, have not liked to do it. I remember so well meeting him with his sweet little wife, just after he was married.

It grieved me to think your dear old father never saw her."

The squire shook his head.

"Ah," he said, "my father refused at first, simply because of the way his recognition was demanded. He never held any reason beside that for doing it. George's own distorted imagination supplied the rest. Certainly she was not a duchess, but she was the daughter of an honest yeoman, of purer extraction than many a duchess, and there was no sweeter lady in the land. My father would have loved her as we all did; but George, with his puritanical speech, always kindled the old man's ire. Then, for no excuse but his own obstinate temper, he cut himself adrift from us. Alice we often went to see—Mary and I—but he never would let her come to us, and barely tolerated our visits. He cast a gloom over everything by his religious or *irreligious* mania; and when she died, dear little woman, as you know—everything went wrong."

He stopped abruptly, and began walking up and down the room with a troubled countenance. Then suddenly he said—

“Letitia, what put it into your head to talk about that to-night?”

“I don’t know, Harry,” she answered. “I wanted you to think of something else; but I am afraid I did not choose my subject very discreetly.”

“Something else! There’s no ‘something else.’ Every sorrow in my life seemed comprised in this thick cloud of misfortune.”

Mrs. Graham was dissatisfied with her success, and vexed with her want of wisdom. She felt for him so deeply that words were inadequate; so she sat silently waiting for him to continue speaking if he so chose.

When he did begin, the manner of his speech rather surprised her.

“I think,” he said, “some spirit must have moved you. I wanted to talk about it, and you are the only person in the world to whom I could speak; for I have that on

my mind that I cannot confide to Mary, or to *her*, my poor child!" He was greatly moved. "I have every reason to believe," at length he continued, "that my poor boy is not dead, but living—living, and estranged from me; from all of us who love him so dearly. A little while ago—my God!—to think of it! What joy, what longing, what free forgiveness! And now it comes in such a form that it can only be shut up in my heart and barred out from the light. I am almost sure *he* wrote the letter that pedlar was supposed to send, and that he was the chief actor in that foolish play that has borne such bitter fruit. I have written to him, but had no reply. Why can he have done this unheard-of thing? It haunts me."

Words were more inadequate than ever! but the cry of her heart found feeble expression, "Oh, why is human love so helpless? God pity him—and help you!"

The lonely wanderer that night, following his thoughts back to the letter whence they

started, touched into a compromise with his stern self-banishment, softened in spite of himself, did not know that the prayers of two kindly souls were hovering about him ! A few days afterwards the squire silently placed this letter before his sister-in-law, and, when read, she as silently returned it ; but her face was very sorrowful, and tears had brimmed over and fallen from her eyes, which was a rare event in the life of Lettice Graham.

“ I have received your kind and merciful letter. No words can convey my sorrow. I hope the cloud may soon be cleared from the prospects of those you love. Thank you for your affectionate remembrance of my mother. The memory of her presence is always with me. I am striving, however feebly, to live up to her standard, while this interlude called ‘ life ’ lasts.

“ When my father insulted her memory by speaking of ‘ my taint of low birth,’ because he said my mother was ‘ a daughter of the people,’ I gave him back his name, and everything I had derived from his house, even those who were dearer to me than words can say. I then resolved to have no family, no name, no relationships ; and—aided by *unpremeditated circumstances*—he whom you knew died then. The miserable facts which have recalled me to a temporary existence in your mind

have also raised up another barrier between the past and the future. She, the sister of my happy boyhood, could never bear to hear the sound of my name again. Let her, I implore of you, still think of me as dead. It is no use replying to this letter. Before you get it, I shall have carefully matured my plans and put myself out of reach. There is a hope beyond the grave ; I will try not to forget it, so that I may meet you there. I am now only a man among my fellow men, with such duties as Providence places to my hand."





CHAPTER XVI.

THINGS NEW AND OLD.

TIME, with its soft noiseless tread, was gently leading on the course of events. More than once, the autumn tints had hung out their brilliant banners on the sloping woods of that beautiful country side, since the Lake Cottage had held its mystery and its romance.

Mrs. Jordan, with her little daughter, had gone back to Chowringhee and Government House—more in sorrow than in anger, leaving a large share of her kindly heart with “her brother’s boy”—that was what she liked best to call him. “I can’t promise your uncle will always feel so generous,”

she said ; “ but, my dear, whenever you come, you will be welcome ” ; and little Amy had cried and clung round his neck, and he had promised to write and send all the news, and take care of “ Syce.”

After this Willy had resumed the old routine, with added work and added importance. Mrs. Ashley’s long absence had ended, and she had rejoined the desolate squire ; and Letty was watching, waiting, hoping for better days, while the little one began to prattle, and its footsteps sounded along the broad terrace above the sloping lawn. Everything, in fact, seemed settling into old grooves, with this difference—for all that one could know or hear, the Phillips’s family had disappeared from the face of the country.

For some time Willy half expected to see the cottage restored to its former appearance, and that the old occupants would surely return. But at last he went to Toolmer’s, in the town, and there made

inquiries as to the furniture, and if Phillips and his wife were coming back?

"Lord! no," Mr. Toolmer said. "I *bought* all the goods off she—all but they chestēs, and she sent for them days ago. To go to Oxton it wur, but they be all gone from Oxton now—man and wife and child and chestēs too; so my son wrote me."

And this was the last authentic trace of the household. With regrets, and wonder, and curious surmises, that family vanished from the ken of Widbury.

Regrets—mainly on Phillips's own account; on his wife's account—wonder, and curious surmise among the gregarious mothers of the village population, who considered themselves as a defrauded community. The notion—so they put it—of a woman of that age having a real live baby—a concession on the part of Providence amounting almost to miracle—and refusing to exhibit! Why, of course, there must be—something wrong!

Mrs. Stacy's reading, though it possessed a bold flavour when first enunciated, was indeed simple and innocent compared with other guesses and suppositions. By dint of "hints" and analogous reasonings, and recollections of the elder women, poor Emma Phillips became a name synonymous with hidden horrors.

At last Anna Birt, whose whispers sometimes bore the characteristics of a blast, threw a new light on everything.

Wandering about one morning holding her latest specimen aloft in her arms, with the preceding one tugging at her skirt—no one could ever accuse *her* of insulting Providence by disguising her family affairs—Anna Birt, seeing the work of removal going on at the Lake Cottage, had gone to "look round a bit." When one of the chests was being lifted, she espied a little parcel on the ground. She picked it up, and while restoring it to the foreman, who had not perceived its fall, she casually peeped into

it, and saw two little caps neatly folded together.

"Here, mister," she said, "this fell to the floor. Looks like it had writing on it; but I bean't no scholar like Mrs. Phillips wur."

The man looked at it, and wiped his heated brow with his sleeve, and inwardly wondered "what the —— the woman was coming in his way for." Outwardly he took the parcel from her, looked at the writing, and gave a sardonic grin.

"They bean't long words," he said; "nór much sense. 'The first caps he wore.' If 'ee poke about a bit, ye might happen to find 'his first tooth,' that's what *my* missus takes on about. Queer things women be, for sure. It may be dropped out o' a drawer. I'll give it to the master," and he put it in his pocket.

That evening "curious surmise" had something to go upon. Mrs. Phillips's baby had two heads. The wise woman who had witnessed its arrival was a friend, and

“friends” will do a deal for “summat.” Liza Hanmer, in controversy with Mrs. Stacy, could say she had seen the bit skinny thing; “but there! bless ’ee, she had only *seen the half o’t.*”

So the legend remained for a time.

As the days continued to run on, Willy grew more accustomed to see the empty house. His rise in position, calling out his working power, was filling up his life with pleasant responsibilities, and soon very little remained to remind him of that exciting break in the monotonous course of his daily existence.

Sunday afternoon he used to devote to exercise and dreaming, and his long solitary walks—for this was his only solitude, and some natures cannot grow without it—came to be a very essential part of his day of rest.

Then he would sometimes turn from the wonderful, unknown, and attractive future, which holds such happy possibilities for the young—turn from the questions with which

all thinking minds are troubled, and look back a little way at his own practical experience.

The impression of that sad time often seemed unreal, almost like things seem in a dream, but for the squire's hearty and cemented friendship, which very greatly distinguished him, and singled him out from among his compeers. And not this alone gave a reality to the bygone tale ; but whether he dreamed dreams of the future or saddened over the past, one figure always hovered in every mind-picture he drew, and he used to long with an intensity that was almost pain, to see Peters' brave, sad, humorous face again. His last words, "Who knows? we may meet again." His hearty hand-grasp, and the sight of the tall strong man walking swiftly away until lost to sight in the narrow street, never failed to bring a dimness into Willy's vision. The fact of his existence had never again been mentioned ; and while the squire's kindly greeting

always awoke the memory of his struggle to be faithful, he little suspected that his presence roused a similar but more instructed recollection in the mind of his warm-hearted patron.

So Willy built his castles and weaved his dreams, but Peters at the Ships' Inn Quay, and the sad woman at the Lake Cottage always appeared in his world of fancies like broken links in a story, with which imagination only could not deal, and of which the end was not yet.

All this time he was working very hard, and at last it became evident that his energetic spirit was carrying him at a more rapid pace than his body was disposed to guarantee. Mr. Cochrane noticed his pale face and dark-rimmed eyes; while his granny, who was growing rather blind, awoke to the fact that the dainties so carefully provided failed to attract, and that the more substantial nourishment, which used to disappear so rapidly, was scarcely touched

upon. So it was agreed that Willy should go for a holiday.

"Rest from work, exercise, and fresh air," was the prescription of Dr. Bellington who lived in the market square.

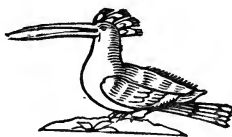
With his two dream-fancies in his mind, he decided on a coach journey to Bymouth *viâ* Forminster. This time there was no hurry, and he could afford to linger and try at his leisure to gain some light on the questions that wanted answer. So he took a room at the coach inn at Forminster for a few days, and while improving his knowledge of the locality, gleaned what he could in another direction. It was not much, however, and not final in any way.

"Guard Phillips? Oh yes, he was well remembered, and his 'hurt' spoken of with much regret. Where he had gone to no one knew. When he was in hospital a man with a bald head came and rubbed his hands and joked with the doctor, and said to mend him quickly, and he wouldn't lose

nothing by it, for there was good news waiting for the sick man to hear. And a lady came, a very white-faced frightened-looking lady—they said she was his wife, leastways, the bald man did—and she took rooms hard by, and had him moved ; and after a bit a strange doctor came, and he travelled with them. He heard the landlord said that they had went to Oxton, but he did ask the carrier and one or two from there, but they said there was no family of name of Phillips known to any.” Having nothing more to say, the genial old man said it over and over again in longer spasms of eloquence each time, until Willy, more than satisfied with quantity, but hardly repaid for patient listening, took his departure, and went on to the next stage.

Alas ! at Bymouth, walking as in a dream, he retraced his steps to the well-remembered place, and found—only silence. The door of the house was locked. The sign still hung above the inn, the waters sparkled

far out under the sunbeams, and lapped against the sides of the old pier, but no living being seemed astir. The "master's" tall figure was no more to be seen grotesquely large and broad in the little doorway of the cottage, and all that brief vivid scene, he was reaching after into the past, had vanished beyond recall, leaving only the void, the throb of physical pain, caused by some mysterious touch on the finer nerves in that "electric chain wherewith we are darkly bound."





CHAPTER XVII.

THE SPECTRE OF THE FUTURE.

AT an easy distance from the city of Bath, on the Bathampton Road, there stood a pretty little house, sheltered from the glare and dust of the white road by a deep strip of walled garden, and a curved belt of well-kept shrubbery. It faced a soft green sward, bordered by a trim parterre of flowers, sweet of scent and bright of hue, within a tracery of close-cut box. A gravel path led diagonally across the grass, and through a meadow beyond, fenced off from the upper lawn. This path for some distance followed the curves of the river, shaded here

and there by weeping willows, its sloping banks sprinkled plentifully with large blue forget-me-not and other moisture-loving blooms. Here, through the sunny hours of a fine dry summer, might be heard the merry laugh and infant prattle of a little child. It was always accompanied by a bright healthy looking young woman, who gave to it her whole time and attention, undistracted by needlework or any other occupation, at least any other occupation that was included in her service. Adjoining this meadow, and separated from it by a low hedge, was grazing land. Towards evening there would always be a stir in the quiet air, just as the sun began to lengthen his lines of light and shadow, and the lowing of anxious kine would be followed by the bubbling of milk in the pails. At this hour child and nurse would always tend toward the gate in the hedge, across which they could watch the rural scene, and then other voices would mingle with their own. This

was partly amusement for the child ; more than partly—gossip for the woman. A few evenings of this entertainment had sufficed to supply the following facts to the new-comer, that was, the maid in charge of the child. The meadow belonged to Farmer Green ; “he were well-to-do, and had a son, and the son favoured cattle and looked to the cows.” The interchange of value elicited in imparting these items, was : that the new tenants of Brook House had come down for the waters ; but the master was tired of the town, and found it very hot, and had come into the country for a little, to stay near the doctor. He was a great invalid, and the mistress was just heart broke about him, and would let no one do a thing for him, but herself. “The dear child ? Well, yes, it should be a comfort, and would be some day, may be ; but just now it didn’t seem much account in way of comfort.”

“Well, it were beautifully dressed, for sure. To see the ribbons and laces a-rolling about

in meadow grass—it do seem like waste, miss.”

“Oh, that’s nothing,” the “miss” said. “There isn’t a bit of trimming on its basket or its cot that isn’t real lace; and every bit of its room, or its clothes, or its toys, where money can be flung, there it is! Yet it’s rare she takes the baby in her arms. She never coo to it, or laugh at its funny ways, for all she sets it up like a little God Almighty, and gives it everything of the best and richest. But there! we all have our own ways of showing love.”

And in course of time the farmer’s son would stroll down to look after the cattle, and he would linger by the gate when the dairy-maid had departed, and make a few experiments on his way of illustrating that old fact. Generally he would bring in his hand a peace-offering to the child of wild flowers, or grasses, or a captured butterfly; and while the baby fingers, with smiles and mysterious babble, tore into pieces that

which it had received with shouts of glee, the young man's eyes and whispered words would find, or seem to find, a reflection and an echo in his goddess of the hour.

One day the child was sitting on the gate, and three hands at least kept it from falling. Whether any antenatal memory of a game lingered in its young being or not, it was slowly showering the leaves one by one upon the ground, and saying softly to itself: "Pitty! pitty! pitty!" Then the fourth hand which was free, held aloft a wild white rose, with its distracting perfume, and the young man said—

"I kept this for you."

"Thank you."

"But I want you to take it and wear it. Set it in among those buttons."

At the word "buttons" the child stopped its game and looked warily round. As he watched the performance unnoticed by the absorbed principals, his eyebrows and his little nose, and every feature gradually

wrinkled with mingled wrath and regret, and finally with the war cry, "Ha'ee button," he grasped the love token and tore it from its place. Then climbing into his nurse's arms, he clutched her like a spread eagle, still roaring, "Ha'ee button! Ha'ee button!"

The young man laughed, and the girl laughed, and the more they laughed, the louder the babe lamented.

"Oh, Master Harry," she said, "the pitty flower! nurse's pitty flower! There—there—there! No one shan't never touch Master Harry's buttons. He's so fond of those buttons," she added in explanation; "he counts them up and down fifty times a day."

"It's more than buttons," her admirer said. "I doubt he's got a thorn prick in his poor little finger."

And so he had, and no delicate attentions could make him forget the fact. He bellowed lustily all along the river side, and up the gravel walk, until his pitiful wail reached the ears of his parents, sitting on a garden lounge

near the flowers. The invalid father spoke first.

"Is that our boy?" he asked of his pale-faced, anxious-looking companion.

"I think it is," she answered. "Yes, here he comes, in Sarah's arms. She must not carry him so much. I wonder what's the matter?"

"Well, I'd make it my business to find out," he rejoined a little sternly. And soon the baby was sitting on his knee, telling his own incomprehensible tale in his own strange tongue, and holding up the injured finger to be made much of; bringing pride and pleasure to smooth away the lines of suffering in the sick man's face. Then visions of bread-and-milk allured the child once more into its nurse's arms, and forgetting its insults and its wrongs, it departed "happy as a king."

"How I long to be well," the poor man said. "To be well and strong—with such a new joy as that,—I'd give up all my riches.

A little while ago I didn't want to live, I didn't want my new fortune, nothing seemed worth the struggle; but now, every day knits me to life and my boy."

His wife had listened to him with her face turned away; upon it was an expression of bitter aching sorrow—not the final stage of hopeless calm despair, but the unaccepted horror of something that had overtaken her unawares.

"Oh," she said, with a bursting sob she could not control, "do I, then, count for nothing?"

He looked astonished and regretful, and putting out his hand laid it on hers.

"Why, wife, not jealous of the child? You and I are one—and he is ours."

It sounded well, but perhaps its logic hardly covered the ground of objection.

One day, not long after this, the comfortable landau and pair of horses, that had been hired for the season, took the lady of Brook House out shopping (ostensibly), and the

sick man sat watching his boy playing with a gaily coloured ball on the gravel before the house. The inevitable "few things" that baby wanted were soon purchased, but very long and patiently the steeds and their driver, stood waiting in front of one of the handsomest and most substantial mansions in that very handsome and substantial city. And, alas! within those walls the blow was falling against which there is no shield.

The physician was a man of note, whose supremacy in his particular line was freely accorded by his compeers, though he was as yet quite young in years. Just now, despite the daily recurrence of such painful scenes, his face wore an expression of genuine regret for the quiet suffering he could not comfort. Standing before him in the calm dignity of sorrow, she had said—

"I have come to know the worst—to beg of you to hide nothing—and yet, if you can—oh, if you can—tell me your knowledge contradicts my fear."

“What do you fear?”

“That this improvement is only temporary; that slowly and gradually he will lose his powers of mind and body. Oh, tell me,” she cried, with clasped hands and tears raining down her face, “tell me it is not so—tell me your science is able to keep it off—that it is my ignorance that foretells this.”

He was silent a moment; then gently he said—

“You are not ignorant. How did you learn so much?”

“I learnt it all when I was young. I have lived all my life, until I married, in charge of an invalid.”

“You are not ignorant,” again he repeated, and then there was another pause.

“How long?” she asked.

“There is no law—but probably he has years of fair content before him. Of course he will never be active, or able to do what other men do; but I don’t think you will be wrong to keep the hope of it alive. Don’t

despond before him. His happiness in great measure rests with you. Try and be thankful for that; I am sure it will make you brave if anything can. There is another crumb of comfort, and indeed, I am at fault in calling it a crumb, for it means much. He will not again suffer much pain, only restlessness, and finally, apathy. Anything I can do—any advice I can give—is always at your disposal. Gainsay him in nothing reasonable. Of course he should not be worried or excited.”

“Are these waters doing him good?”

“None in the world.”

“He has lately come into a small property on the south coast; he wants to go there.”

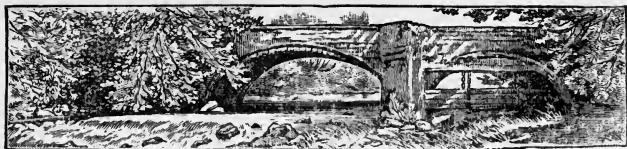
“It can be done by slow and gradual stages. There is nothing better for his spirits and his strength than sea air.”

The silver harness shone and jingled merrily as the horses tossed their heads; the white dust rose and followed after the rapid round of the wheels. Honest country

women, heated and red faced, carrying home their brown-paper parcels of household necessities, looked longingly at the easy figure of the lady, leaning back on her cushions, and moving luxuriously and quickly to her home. There was no outward visible sign to tell that a human life was entering into its fiery furnace, taking up a secret and sorrowful burden, beside which petty trials of ordinary lives, sank and dwindled out of sight!

Not many weeks after this the Brook House was empty. The baby voice had carried its echoes elsewhere—and young Green had found another love.





CHAPTER XVIII.

AT SUNSET.

AFTER Peters had written and posted his letter to the squire, he continued his desultory journey to the coast, taking any route he fancied, and stopping here and there, wherever the place attracted him.

He had no artist's materials in his bag, no easel to set up in wild places to the astonishment of gaping boys and admiring women, only a note-book in his pocket, a crayon, and a penknife; but he would stand, and looking with humble steady gaze, drink in the beauties that he loved, making short memoranda of the house or the farm, or striking point in shade or colour, and weeks, months,

sometimes years after, he would look back and draw from the treasure-house of his memory some beautiful scene that once had been.

In the little town of Hilton-by-the-Sea, he found Ben very comfortably settled in his new home. The place itself was quite unique in its varied advantages. Seawards there were lovely sands at low tide, rocks and cliffs of curious colouring, and filled with stony wonders of ages long gone by. Inland every road and lane and meadow path led to some charming or romance-distinguished spot, while on the heights above the town, both by land and by sea, the views were enchanting as unlimited.

Why not linger here as well as any other place? So he wandered about inspectingly, and at last he found a cottage with two rooms, and larger, lighter windows than any cottage he had ever seen before. It was in a sheltered nook, on a platform of level ground where a green hollow nestled into the

cliff, facing straight out to sea. It had been unoccupied for some time, and was in rather a dilapidated state. A porch with trellis-work in the centre and a good-sized room on either hand, and in each room two large windows, one looking to the front and one to the side. It had been well and strongly built. The fishermen and boys upon the beach, with whom Peters held daily intercourse, said it was uninhabited because it was lonesome, and people took to fancying things. They seemed shy of saying more, but the inquirer was persistent and persevering, and at last the story was unfolded and imparted to him by an old inhabitant.

“There was a lad who was the only son of his mother, and she was a widow. He was not a bad lad in the main; handsome, wild, and reckless. He enlisted for a soldier, and it broke his mother’s heart. She was poor, very poor, and could not buy him out, so he had to go. There were those who had taken her to see the last of her boy as he

left his native land, and they heard his merry words, as he laughed and shook the curly head that was her pride.

“ ‘Cheer up, mother! If they don’t treat me like a lord, I’ll run away, and swim back to the old Red Cove on Hilton beach. Have a rope handy to pull me in!’

“Well, the very night as she got home, it was told her she was well-to-do now. The parson brought her the news that money had come to her, and give her the purse with gold in it. She took it in her hand, and looked at it a long while, and then her eyes grew wild. She gave it back to parson and said, ‘It’s too late! he’s gone!’ and fell senseless on the ground. She never was quite right again; not like she used to be. She built that cottage with the money; the four big windows to keep look-out. There’s the little path she had cut to the Red Cove. She lived there long years. She would never have any with her; but day and night, summer and winter, she would be watching

by the window, and when the dusk fell, she would light bright lights all round the house. The neighbours would go and see her, and she talked like any one else, and stopped to speak if you met her in the town ; but there in the house, on every chair, in every corner, would be coils and coils of rope. On wild nights, when winds and waves were roaring, the neighbours would keep an eye to the cottage for fear she might do some crazed thing and come to harm ; but she never made the offer to stir, only we would see her pacing up and down, and looking to the light in the windows. So folk forgot their fears.

“She had been in that cottage nigh twenty years, when one night there came a storm wilder than any of us could remember ever before. We were all up and about, and trying to look through the black night out to sea, for there now and then a light flashed to view,—then swooped into the darkness and was lost,—and came again, and went. It was a ship in sore distress, and we were helpless,

for no boat could have been put out across the surf that was breaking on the shore. There was a roaring gust of wind, and we held on, one to the other, to keep our legs, and then that lonely light seemed to leap upward in the air, and then—— ‘She’s gone,’ said one; ‘no boat would live in such a sea. God rest their souls!’ And then some one cried out, ‘Look to the lights in the cottage; how they flare!’ But we had no time to heed the lights. Above the storm we heard her voice, ‘I’m coming; Joe lad; I’m coming!’

“Over that rock that juts out there, where the little path comes down to the Red Cove, something flashed out and fell into the sea; and then above the surf we saw a boat come, like it was riding on a wave, and the angry water turned it over as it touched the strand, and washed its living freight up to our feet.

“*It was Joe, sir!* safe enough, and his child in his arms, and four men with him of

the crew. They were bound for London when the storm overtook them, and the little boat they launched in their despair was driven to the shore. They took their strength to keep her head to the lights, and that saved them, for the cove is the only soft sandy bottom in the bay."

"And the mother?"

"Oh yes,—the mother. When the day broke, we found her under the rock, quite dead, and looking young as she lay there, though her hair was white. Gripped tight in her hand and twisted round her body was the rope, and at its further end, tumbling about in the water, a lantern she had tied there. We thought the force of the wind and the heavy throw had made her lose her balance.—It seemed hard, sir, didn't it? He were a fine man, but he couldn't bide here. It like choked him, and the cottage has been empty ever since. Why? There's no reason—only just the solemn feeling of that twenty years' watch and

waiting—and never to come out till that one night ! It's just the feeling, that's all."

Peters went to look at it again next day. He stood by the window where the lonely mother had waited all those years, and it made him unutterably sad. He did not take the cottage and live there, he soon found other quarters ; but he repaired it, and, for the few years he remained at Hilton, he would go every night in all weathers and trim and light his brilliant lamps, and leave them burning there till dawn. When he did go away he made the charge over to other hands, and arranged for defraying the expenses.

This was one of the many simple deeds that grew up in the foot-tracks of this wandering "son of the people." He was happy in his own way, especially in his Blue Beard chamber, childishly happy sometimes, when, obedient to the hand that guided it, and answering to the promptings of his mind, his brush would leave a breezy stir

among the branches of his trees, or veil the distance in moving haze, or make the white clouds bear their proper guise, of restless wayfarers across the blue. He would step back approvingly, and say to himself in cordial tones—

“ My dear fellow, I congratulate you ! In correct environment, Peters, you might have become an artist.”

Many of these sketches found their way into cottages where there were sick people or feeble ones who could not get out. Sometimes they were highly prized. Sometimes—tell it not in Gath—they were pawned ! He never noticed their absence from accustomed places, but would think to himself, with a humorous smile in his eyes, that perhaps he might be winning fame without knowing it.

At one time he had lashed himself with a whip of small cords, so to speak, by accusing himself of selfish pleasure on this enchanted ground, but then a new light dawned upon

him and eased his conscience. He taught poor Ben, who could only move slowly about, to make frames, or rather to make the ornaments to put upon them, and then the making of the pictures found a reason !

Poor Ben ! gradually he was growing weaker and weaker. And at last the time came when his work would lie untouched before him, as he sat in the sun at the door of the little house where he lived, and he would think of little but seeing the master and hearing his voice. The clergyman used to come and visit him, a kindly man and sensible, but his theology was a little hard for Ben. Often he would appeal to Peters for information, but Peters had "never studied church subjects," he said, and always changed the conversation when he could.

The sun was just setting, leaving the world in a grand procession of gorgeous clouds, that gathered to see the last red spark sink down behind the sea ; the air was hot and still, and the little wavelets made a

gentle murmur on the sand. Ben had been more silent than usual. The evening light was reflected very softly from his honest rugged face and thin plain features, and he looked at least twenty years older than his real age.

Presently he said—

“ ‘There shall be no more sea.’ I’m real sorry for that, master. When I sit looking across it to the sundown, seems like it was a road into all the beautiful places I’ve never seen, but I know they are.”

Peters was silent.

“There’s a many things passon says I don’t seem to grip hold on.”

He looked. The master was listening and thinking hard, he could see that, so he went on—

“I never learnt much religion. The first I remember was a text my mother told me. She said it were shortest but one in the whole Bible, and easy to learn—‘God is Love,’ and she worked it on a ribbon. And

she taught me 'Our Father.' I used to say it at night, with my arms locked round her neck. When I went to church, Sundays, it were all words, but when the trouble came, I used often to say 'Our Father,' and it were a stand-by, like I were a child again. Now passon says the very words; but he puts more on to it, and I lose my way. When I think on my own religion that I know, it's like the path across the sea, and it goes into the strange country out of sight, but there, sure enough. Passon's way is all dark and new. 'There shall be no more sea.' He's very kind and that, but it don't seem much count to me about meeting him again. But, master, I want to go your road, humbly and like a servant, only so as I don't lose you at the last, if you'll just give me a word to help me on."

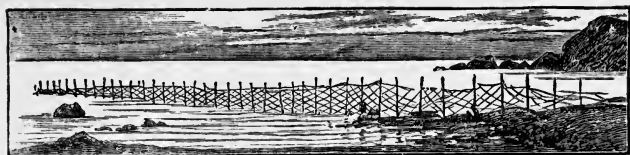
The master was still silent; but a glance was sufficient to tell his expectant companion that the reply would come, and he waited patiently.

At last Peters lifted up his downbent head, and his blue eyes had a look not often there.

“Well, you and I have travelled a stormy bit of road together, Ben, and when I reach that horizon I shall be only too thankful to drop behind the margin into such good company. As you were speaking, I seemed to hear a voice that has never been silent in my life, though the outer world has lost its echoes, and it said, ‘Be true to yourself; do honestly the duty that lies to your hand, and light will come.’ Like yourself, Ben—I do not know—just as we look out on your pathway over the sea, and there comes a line where the world is in the sky and the sky melts into the world, but no straining of the sight, no human power, can see what is beyond. If we were meant to see it, the power would be given us; so that even our ignorance, my ignorance and yours, comes from the same source as all that has been given us. One thing only is plain; walk

straight, and feel quite sure whatever comes will be best, and most just and merciful. Listen to the good clergyman, and take all you can from his teaching. Perhaps he knows more than we do; but your old religion of love and trust is the meaning of it all." With the gentleness of a woman he took the thin wasted fingers in his strong hand. "So along that path, Ben, we go hand in hand, knowing nothing—trusting in God as the child trusts his mother; only each must go alone—and I think the first traveller will have the best of it."





CHAPTER XIX.

BEYOND THE CLOUDS.

AFTER Letty, in the plenitude of her faith and love, had taken up her rightful position by her husband's side, his symptoms had become more and more favourable, and the sudden fits of uncontrollable excitement had ceased altogether. The evil with which they had to contend was the peculiar form his weakness had taken; the power of distinct speech had deserted him; and the words he tried to say in his feeble voice had no coherence. The more strenuous the effort, the less it was successful, and the utter prostration that followed was pitiable to witness. The first

time he awoke from a short sleep, and saw his wife sitting beside him with her work in her hand, a smile lit up his face ; then the excitement returned, he looked fearfully round the room, and began to talk—without a language.

Letty laid her cool hand on his forehead, and spoke quietly but firmly—

“It is all right, Stephen. No evil can come between us ever again. If you love me, don’t try to talk until you are stronger.”

Some days afterwards, in a quiet and restrained voice, he asked for his desk.

Letty sent for it, unlocked it and placed it within his reach. Exercising the self-control that was gradually returning to him, his trembling fingers sought, and closed upon, that foolish document that had built up such a tragedy. It was the first time Letty had seen it. She turned very pale as he held it to her with an appealing look of inquiry. Then she took it from his hand, and tore it deliberately into little fragments.

"Forget it," she said. "It was no marriage ever—only a trick of some of your college friends."

"Is that true?" he said hoarsely, and then the glad light that was beginning to dawn in his eyes became obscured, and he fainted away.

But joy had a kinder awakening for them this time, and gradually as the power of expression returned to him, with calmness and self-control, he asked Letty to read to herself the entries in the journal in his desk. This, of course, was not to be found, and its disappearance, when communicated to him, threatened a renewal of the old attacks. Again the faithful woman by his side had to repeat her assurance of full trust, and beg him to avoid thinking or speaking of that which she was in no hurry to have explained.

So things had continued for the present, regarding the unexplained portion of this strange story, while outwardly life at Long

Dene began to assume a quiet domestic phase unknown before between those two—all barriers broken, no hidden rankling torture, no doubt, no suspicion, any more.

Only Letty's heart would ache as she noticed the wasted form, the feeble movement, the thin nervous clasp of his hand, and the growing change that could not be denied or contradicted by the happy light in his eyes, or the full content that seemed to pervade his being.

Perfect quiet was recommended. Mrs. Ashley had returned to Shirley, and they had elected to pass the Christmas alone together. Stephen could not face a journey, and they both felt out of tune for the family gatherings that would break upon their new and pleasant solitude *à deux*.

It was Christmas Eve, and typical enough. A white world around Long Dene, not of snow, but of frozen mist that had left its wondrous forms in silvered image on every tree and every blade of grass, and every

spider's web that had resisted the autumn wind ;—a stillness in the air on which the sounds of country life were clearly borne to far distances, and the blue sky domed above it all. The reflex of the crimson sun setting behind the trees shone through the windows, and the glow of a bright fire from within lit up a happy group in the pleasant drawing-room that faced the terrace. Stephen in his easy chair beside the hearth, Letty on a low stool beside him, with her baby on her knee, amusing herself with the mystic games that only mothers can play—pinching the soft pink chin, bending with cooing words of endearment over the soft pink face with its large wondering eyes, and laughing when the half-roused intelligence of the little being on whom she gazed with such wrapt delight deigned to return her attentions with an answering smile or an incoherent murmur, the preliminary exercise of the voice “to be.” This incoherent sound presently took a rather fretful tone,

and the young mother, looking out on the fast-closing day and the red light fading in the west, murmured little comforting words about "sweet birdies" and their "nests," and rising, rang the bell for "nurse to take baby."

Before the little bundle had been carried from her sight, she buried her face in the soft wrappings that enveloped it, and gave it butterfly kisses on its cheek and chin and forehead.

"Please, nurse," she said, "tell Gray not to bring lights until I ring for them."

Then she returned to the low chair by Stephen, drew it nearer to him, put her hand in his, and said—

"Oh, Stephen, when you are quite well, how happy we shall be!"

A sudden sense of the gulf between yesterday and to-day, and the wonderful bridge that had landed them safely on this side, came into both their minds.

"Tell me *now*, Stephen; tell me about

your journal. Whatever *has* been is nothing to me when I feel what *is*."

So then and there, in the gathering twilight of that Christmas Eve, with many breaks and pauses and some painful hesitation, he told her all. There was a strength imparted to him by the pure and faithful soul of the woman who nestled close beside him in the fading light, and, beginning at the very beginning, he never spared himself. The wild follies of his youth, the will-o'-the-wisp he followed, his mad reckless haste to grasp at any cost that false star that was luring him. The bitter awakening, the remorse that filled his soul when he saw the true star shining across his path—so near and so unattainable. Then came the letter with the glad tidings that his bonds were broken, and he was free. He told her of the ring, of his visit to the grave, and his superstitious repetition of the words. His thankful happiness, and longing to tell her all some day.

On the next chapter in the story there was no need to dwell. It had been equally shared by both.

And then he recalled to her a time and place, one of the beautiful seaside hamlets on the Cornish coast, where they were lingering for some days near the end of their happy tour. He recalled her words, spoken half in jest, half in earnest, as they sauntered home together from the beach, and he had been speaking of his youth—rather sadly meditating a confession of his past history; but she was gay and would none of it.

“Oh, do be merry,” she had said. “When we are quite old and foolish you can tell me how wicked you’ve been, and I’ll scold, in a cap and big spectacles; but I couldn’t scold you now, for you have me—me, only me—and I shouldn’t mind if you told me you were—well, not *were*—but had been Blue Beard himself!”

And then, when he went home, he found

a letter in the writing of that woman whom he had believed to be dead and buried, and out of his life. That letter was not in the journal, for its cruel wicked words had been torn and scattered. She confessed the first letter had been purposely written that he might be set free to marry an——

And here Letty interrupted him.

“Stop!” she said. “Not one word more now or ever! I am glad I cannot read that cruel journal. Oh, Stephen, can’t I see, remembering, and now bemoaning, all the miserable hours you must have spent with it? I would be just as miserable, suffering it all over again for you, if I saw it. I never doubted your love for me, except for one mad day. I heard you talking in the ruins; at least, I heard her, and I *hated* her so, I was afraid, because of baby, and so I ran away; coward, coward that I was, and a deserter; but as soon as I was quiet and could think—I came back, and nothing, not even *that*, would have made me leave you

again! Forget it, darling, only remember how good it is to be together now, and have baby here, too. Forget it, and get well soon."

Stephen did not answer, he only took her hand and clasped it in both his own, and laid his lips upon it, with a grave tenderness and a silent prayerful homage to the beauty and the strength of a good woman's love! The red glow had faded from the sky, a pure white robe was cast over the earth. "Stars had arisen and the night was holy."

* * * * *

The passing months, alas! brought but little returning vigour to the master of Long Dene. Three times the spring had breathed warmly over the awakening land, and yet Stephen moved slowly from bed to chair. Poor old Cæsar's importunity had gained him admission to the house, and when the sun shone, and the birds began to sing, he would hunt in the hall for

Stephen's stick and carry it into the room and lay it at his master's feet, vigorously wagging his tail, and looking imploringly out of his big brown eyes, waiting for the companion he had missed so long! Brave Letty's tears lay deep in her heart, but she struggled to keep them from her eyes, and Stephen never murmured. Then came the inevitable physician—the consultation, the prescription, that, in those days meant, far more directly than is now the case, "I can do nothing;" and that prescription was, "Try the Continent. Slow careful movement, change of scene, may avert what threatens, but the heart has been weakened beyond repair."

This was the opinion of the great man who had been summoned by Lord Mortlands to consult with Dr. Slade.

The programme of banishment, however, met with Stephen's firm opposition, even Letty's persuasions had no effect, perhaps because they were urged from a mere sense

of duty, with no glimmer of faith in the good that might result. Indeed she felt, with him, that no change would compare with the peace and contentment of the present. Surely if external conditions could create healing power, those conditions were round him.

In the depth of her soul a dark shadow hovered; with the strength of a love that is not "Time's fool," she braced herself to meet a future of unspeakable pain, perhaps, but selfish pain only. As for Stephen himself, the physical force that failed seemed transferred in double portions to the inner life that could not die. If the hope of renewed health and strength was taken from him with a secret struggle, he gave no sign. With cheerful calmness he awaited the decree, recognizing in his life the hand of love and mercy. For awhile each carried in silence the burden of their fear; but noting the pale passion of grief in her dear face, Stephen broke that silence, once for

all, and henceforth there was no pretence of ignoring the coming of that dread visitor whose approach was painfully sure. Was it then all sadness, this life of theirs? Oh! surely not. Who can deny that often, in the annals of domestic history, a long life—a bond that is a prison chain—the continual clash of two discordant beings—contains the elements of a sadness that has no equal. No anchor of hope to cast on ahead when shipwreck threatens, no love, no faith, no light!

This grief of theirs was a grief that may hardly be spoken; but round it was a sea of glory. What had been, what was, what should be, all theirs—a possession that could never be taken from them. Each soul its fellows' guiding star, each immortal spirit, lying passive, devoid of struggles and murmurs, in the hand of that power that designed them—two in one.

When the autumn sun was throwing level shadows on the terrace at Long Dene, and

the brightness was fading from the flower-beds on the lawn that sloped towards the great spreading cedars,—then it was, the messenger came for Stephen.

For some weeks he had seemed much better, had even walked along the terrace with assistance, and had taken short drives on sunny days. Letty's hope almost revived, and half-formed plans of trying a milder climate for the winter, flitted through her mind.

One morning, sitting by the open window, she approached the subject.

"How delicious this sunshine is," Stephen said; "this fine autumn will shorten the winter."

"Stephen," Letty answered very softly, kneeling down beside the couch on which he was resting, "don't you think it would be good for you to go to some warm place, and keep out of reach of winter weather?"

He drew her closer to him, and for a moment did not reply.

“No, dear wife,” he said at last; “it is good, it is best, to be here—until the end. We both know it is so decreed, do we not? Our courage must not fail now. Dear, your love has been to me such a strength, such a power! Hard as it is to leave you, I will never murmur. Leave you? I can never leave you. Oh, Letty, my darling, you are so completely soul of my soul, the bond between us is so close, so firm, so free of dross. I think what you think before you speak it. I see in your eyes more, ay, far more, than the dear human love that, for all its sweetness, holds the elements of change and decay. We can *never* be parted—think of that. Remember, even if you remain here till you are old and grey, my spirit is with you, a part of you, waiting to be completed, until you come. Never falter, never murmur. If the All Father leaves you on earth, your life is apportioned out to you, because it has some work to accomplish. Think of great things—of the vastness that

surrounds our little sphere, and believe that, insignificant atoms as we are, the everlasting Arms are round us."

He held her white face in his two hands, and looked earnestly upon it. She dared not meet his eyes; the tears fell from under her closed lids. Gently she removed his clasping hands, and whispered—

"I will try, Stephen." And went away, to regain in a short solitude that self-possession that was so necessary for his dear sake.

Not many mornings after this conversation, the nurse had brought the child into the drawing-room before taking it for its usual walk. Lispings its alluring infant speech, the little one had clung round its mother's skirt, and demanded its mother's company.

"How can you resist her?" Stephen said. "Yes, Doris, take mammy to pick flowers. It will do her good."

With a glad shout of triumph, the child

ran to the couch, raising herself on tip-toes to kiss "dear daddy."

Letty tied on her hat, and paused as she left the room, saying—

"I won't be long away."

Their eyes met, and thoughts beyond utterance flashed between them. He leant back, with such a happy smile of contentment on his face. She thought of it all the time she was out, and,—when returning up the long avenue,—recalled her first drive, and Stephen's passionate eyes, and troubled cry, "Oh, Letty! how long will you love me?"

Moved to the depth of her being with the bitter-sweet of helpless human longing, she left the child with the nurse, and, hastening her steps, re-entered the room.

* * * * *

Only one smile has power to set the seal of peace that lingered on the beloved face!

Courage, poor Letty! The storm-cloud folds you in its darkness, but look up. The

Light that is beyond all clouds will pierce through the gloom. Look back to the story of that Life that gives new life to all humanity, and remember that the sepulchre was in a garden.





CHAPTER XX.

THICK DARKNESS.

NOT very long after that talk at sunset, one traveller had crossed the margin into unknown lands. He left, "taking no farewell."

One morning, that—which had been Ben Moore—lay stretched on the bed under the window (which was always left a bit open that he might hear the sea), just as if, with a glad sigh, the prisoner had burst his bonds and was free!

This was no subject for morbid melancholy, quite the contrary; but there is a selfish element in all grief, and with that Peters had to deal. He lingered on at Hilton, trying

to feel settled and contented, and almost wondering at the blank left in his life by the loss of his humble friend. But the clouds were gathering round him into deeper gloom, and the darkest shadows fell when he saw the death of Stephen Holdness chronicled in the county paper. Stephen dead and laid to rest in Widbury churchyard!

All this time he had been hoping that the great sorrow was being smoothed away, and such brightness as was possible returning to his little cousin's home. Now he felt like Cain, that he must wander to the end with a brand that could not be effaced! It overwhelmed him with a haunting, unreasoning horror, and it took all his strength to shake off one bias of his condemnatory feeling, which threatened for a time to rob him of all faith in that Wisdom that had permitted these strange events, and placed so heavy a punishment on one who was so innocent of wrong.

He knew his action in the matter had been to save his friend from the possible consequences of his folly—and how far he had saved him neither he nor any one else concerned, except the woman herself, ever knew—but in his self-accusing mind the blame lay in his selfishness, the utter absorption in himself and his own affairs that had left Stephen in ignorance of all the facts—the small effort he had made counting as nothing in the magnitude of the events that had ensued. Of the episode of Lizzie's crowning treachery, and Stephen's real innocence, he had no knowledge, and herein lay the kernel of his remorse. By his action Stephen had succumbed to dire temptation in committing what he believed to be the sin of a second marriage; and to Letty—whose frank nature he knew so well—could anything restore her ruined trust? The whole burden of that hopeless wrong and suffering lay on his shoulders. For months he tried to combat his desperation

by every means he could devise ; but rest would not come to him.

At last he sent his books and the few things he had collected to be stored at Bymouth. Again he wandered from place to place, a melancholy, miserable man, with a strain upon his heart and brain that gradually sapped his strength and left him a gaunt skeleton of his former self.

The autumn after Stephen died, Peters' wanderings almost unconsciously led him towards the places of his boyhood ; and one morning he found himself near Nether Melcombe.

He had no need to fear recognition !

It was about midday when he reached the town. He took some refreshment in the coffee-room of the quiet old inn, and towards sunset he sauntered, by fields and lanes, to where he saw the spire of Widbury church, and knew that round it lay—what poor humanity, still clinging to the dust, calls—the garden of souls. Churchyards, as a

rule, he carefully avoided, but this time something he could not resist drew him to the place. It was very still, and he stood in silence for a few moments, not daring to approach his dead friend's grave, crying out in his sorrow-laden heart for something to do, something to suffer, something to achieve by which he could in a small measure atone for the folly of past years.

And as he stood, so yearning, far away along the meadow-path he knew so well he saw a sombre figure slowly moving towards the place where he was standing, and his heart beat faintly. Love, and loss, and loneliness he had known, but he felt that any grief he had ever realized must fall far short of that sorrow he had caused to another. How had he dared to come and stand above the dead man's grave? Reluctantly taking his eyes off the advancing figure, he moved away, and entering the church porch, sat down within its shadow. He heard the rustle of her garments on the

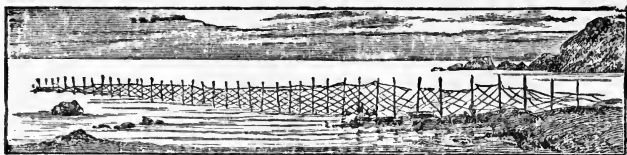
path, the scent of violets reached him. Rising, he looked through the side window of the porch, and saw her standing there. She was simply dressed in black, no floating veil, no parade of sorrow. The wreath of violets was in her hand, her head was slightly raised, and her eyes were closed for a few seconds ; then she raised the flowers to her lips, and reverently laid them at the foot of the white cross, that bore only his name, and the single word "Peace." She lingered an instant, looking down on the green earth that was his covering, then she lifted her eyes, filled with an ecstasy, a reflex of things unseen, and moved slowly away as she had come.

Through the rest of his life that image never faded from the wanderer's mind. The pale, sweet face, faint shadow of the merry companion of his happy days, the look of patient suffering, the slight graceful form. All this he had seen—this and more. He had seen the faithful love of a woman's soul, that had

power to give, and to receive, beyond the barriers of death and the grave!

When she had disappeared from view once more, Peters left Widbury churchyard. He passed rapidly along the high-road for miles and miles, not thinking of what he passed or where he was going; his weak and fainting body only sustained by the strange mechanism within, that was flying from itself, and ever beaten back by the sea of sorrow that encompassed it on every hand.

He had breasted the steep hill leading into Wimford, and entered the quaint, old-fashioned town, when, close against the chemist's shop that stands at the corner of the High Street, he staggered and fell, and the thick darkness of mental despair gave place to a merciful blank—a pause, and deadness to any feeling whatever in mind or body.



CHAPTER XXI.

THE ELEVENTH HOUR.

AND now the great clock of circumstance had nearly done its round ; all the complicated wheels and inner machinery were preparing to strike a final chime, holding the key-note to the strange histories of these mingled, yet widely separated lives. Old Time had stalked on, sometimes with a scythe, sometimes with a garland. Childhood to youth ; youth to maturity ; maturity to age ; and age to that we cannot follow ! So the world goes on, and many fall by the roadside before the journey is completed. This, as regards humanity. But in more material ways changes had passed over

the surface of that old vale where these lives were being played out.

Not only had the gossips by the village well in Widbury changed their thrilling tales since the days of Emma Phillips ; not only had some heads grown grey, some limbs rheumatic, but the signal of the closing day had changed also, and the marvels of the process had ceased to make the rustics stare ! The echo of the cheerful horn had died away for ever, and in its place they heard the growing and the failing beat of the steam-engine ; while long lines of rapid curling smoke, flashed in and out among the woods that crowned the Rushy Lake.

Old Mrs. Watson, in the ripeness of age, blest with the presence she loved so well, proud and thankful to note his growing fortunes, had left Willy a solitary dweller in the old home. Fanny still darned his socks, but she now kept the largest roughnesses for the heels of her own good man,

when he “vexit” her; for she had married the gardener, and settled down for life on the scene of her old tantrums. Her master had altered but little. He still took long solitary walks, and dreamed dreams; and, though he had never heard of Peters or of Emma Phillips, they were not forgotten. He still gave his faithful homage to the family at the Hall, but Fate had not again exacted a service at his hands. A deep shadow had once more passed over Shirley. The squire had lost his Mary, and only half his individuality remained on this side that unknown land to which she had gone. There was no doubt about it, he was ageing very fast; and now when the season so dear to every West-country gentleman came round, his familiar figure was no longer seen on the bright crisp mornings, wearing the pink, and eagerly settling in his saddle for a good burst, over the prettiest and pleasantest county in the southern half of England.

And Letty herself,—what had her life

been? With the fountain of her desolation ever flowing, but sealed up within herself, with her faithful memory of *his* words creating within her mind a companionship of which the world knew nothing, her life was a source of brightness and happiness to most of those, who had the privilege of coming within the circle of its influence. Her poor neighbours loved her; when in trouble they looked for her coming like a gleam of light, and were as eager to have her sympathy in their rejoicing. And when her mother died, the dear link that had held her evenly to her two parents since the commencement of her being took a divergent line; but she had no sense of loss, only of parting to meet again. In the stillness of the summer twilight, or sitting by the winter fire, Henry Ashley would talk of his wife to the daughter who so forcibly recalled her to his mind; but of Stephen they never spoke.

Only to the child, when they were quite

alone, was that veil over the past removed by Letty's hand. From her earliest infancy the little one would talk of "father." His miniature, his watch, his hunting-crop, the pencil sketch of Cæsar carrying his stick, all the dear relics of her brief life of love and youth, with which Letty had surrounded herself in her own room, became familiar to the little Doris.

Often in the golden evenings, when there was no risk of falling dew, the two would wander over the meadow-path that led from the park-gates to the churchyard. Their talk would be of things invisible to human ken—the immensity above, the infinity below, the starry worlds on high, the little lives trodden beneath their feet. From the ordinary mysteries of life, the flowers "reorient out of dust," the self-built grave of the caterpillar, and the issue of the bright-winged butterfly from its sombre shell, Letty would try simply to lead the childish thoughts to the All-Father, who gave His creatures life

and beauty and love ; incomprehensible, but ever just, even when His darkest clouds were cast about our way !

The flowers plucked by the little one's hands would be deftly woven together, and left by that still couch under the stars, " with Dorrie's love." So the child had grown up, possessed of a sort of memory of the father whose last kiss had been placed upon her baby lips.

Strange to say, she was bright and laughter-loving as even her mother had been ; with the same delights and occupations, but rarely having companions of her own age, and never seeming to miss them. It was one of her great delights to handle little treasures of old days that her mother had shown her, and sometimes in the twilight hours to get her to talk softly of the past times, and the dear companion who had left her so lonely when she was a girl. Once she had said—

" Oh, mammy, how I wish I had a brother !" But one quick look in her mother's face, and

she had thrown her arms about her, nearly strangling her with kisses, and vowing to herself she would never say that again. She was a very popular visitor in the village, while her appearance at the school was the signal for a broad grin. She made warm things and pretty trifles for the children. She gave prizes on selected and original grounds, and all the rewards and encouragements of her own schoolroom, were re-enacted with great discrimination among her humble favourites. Indeed, she soon became a power, and many a youthful delinquent was arrested on an evil course by the threat, "Very well, then ; I'll just tell Miss Doris."

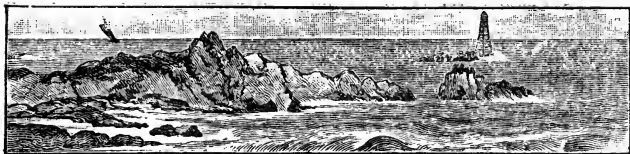
Every winter Colonel and Mrs. Graham came to Shirley. The colonel, looking at least ten years younger than his age seemed to warrant, annually renewed his vigour at the thought that the " Hunt was up," while Doris rejoiced in having so keen a chaperon.

Her mother, moved with secret misgivings on the same score, always made surreptitious

requests to their rector to keep his eye on the young lady ; and indeed Doris was well aware that this wily old gentleman knew all the turns and twists among the vales and hills, and often reached the desired goal, by safe travelling, far ahead of more reckless compeers.

And so the big clock seemed to be going on in an even monotony of level beats, but hidden from the view, at home and abroad, the whirr of the machinery had commenced, and the hands were coming together to strike the hour.





CHAPTER XXII.

A SILVER LINING.

MR. WRIGHT, the chemist at Wimford, had not always been a melancholy man; indeed, quite the contrary. Well-educated by his parents, they had crowned their duty to their only son by placing him in a paying business while he was quite a young man, and at the commencement of his career he had been most popular among the ladies, vying with the curate in the matter of slippers and such luxuries. He had also achieved a reputation for wit, and for singing tenor songs. Alas! there is no accomplishment better calculated than that for hurrying on the responsibilities of life. It is so nice

to be accompanied ; it is so nice to like the society of the accompanist ; it is so alluring to look forward to a life of harmony together. Arguments in favour seemed sound ; what is more than enough for one is a sufficiency for two. So, hand-in-hand with Miss Anna Hicks, Archibald Wright took the plunge.

Very soon the duet of harmony became a chorus of trebles and basses ; and, contrary to all rules of the art, the last note in the domestic chord was always the dominant.

Of course, within certain limits, these events have their own peculiar charm, and Archibald's melancholy did not indicate sadness, only this same responsibility. Anna's taper fingers still did their clever work, and whenever domestic concerns permitted, she figured as a leading musician at all concerts for church and school purposes. The tenor songs, too, still evoked applause, but they were not delivered in the old assured style as if they were the only things

worth living for, but more as interludes permitted in the midst of superior claims.

At last it became a serious question—how to make a sufficiency for two into a sufficiency for six or seven ?

After deep consideration, the internal arrangements of the upper stories of the dwelling-house were revised ; and in the shop window, among the large coloured vases, there appeared a card, neatly written in large letters—

APARTMENTS TO LET.

INQUIRE WITHIN.

Now the question was, Who could possibly take them ? It was dwelling in the mind of Mr. Wright very persistently, and interfering with his calculations as he sat at his ledger after the lights were lit, biting the end of his long quill pen and trying to make out the bills of his customers.

Presently the errand-boy came in hurriedly with his basket ; but instead of going

up to the counter to collect the medicine for taking on his last round, he came up to the desk with wide-open eyes.

“There be summat wrong thère, Maister Wright.”

“What? Something wrong about the medicine?”

“Noa,”—pointing outside—“thic man look like he wur dead!”

With the assistance of the neighbours, “thic man” was lifted into the little room at the back of the shop, and the scattered articles of family mending taken off the horsehair couch to make room for his poor, senseless form.

Wright sent at once for the doctor. There was only one, and the town was healthy, and had a small death average. A very careful examination was made.

“Splendid frame!” the doctor said. “Sound—all sound—but everything over-worked, except the digestion. Not food enough to keep this great body going. A

case for good soups and utter quiet. No stimulants."

Wright rubbed his chin and looked thoughtful.

"Are you going to keep him here? He's a gentleman, though his dress is not conventional. Any papers about him?"

"I haven't looked, sir."

In the inner breast-pocket of his coat was a letter addressed to P. Peters, Esq., and directed to some post-office to be called for. It was from the London and County Bank, Bymouth, acknowledging receipt of money; and with it was a cheque-book half-used.

"There," Dr. Sherwell said; "I told you so. I'll write to the bank. Meanwhile, my very good friend, you just let your apartments to this sick man, and pull him through, under my advice. I'll be responsible."

And thus the lodger was provided.

The bank replied to Dr. Sherwell that the description agreed with the outward

show of P. Peters, Esq.; that he was an eccentric gentleman, but always with a good balance to credit. They would forward the information to the source from whence the moneys came, but felt Dr. Sherwell would in no way repent his prompt kindness on the occasion.

Mrs. Wright had popped her head over the bannisters when her husband, on the evening in question, had called out to her from the foot of the stairs.

"Yes, Archie," she said in a loud whisper; "don't make such a noise."

"Get the bed ready sharp. Mind the sheets are well aired. I've let the apartments to a sick gentleman."

"What? To-night?"

"Yes, at once."

Mrs. Wright came a little way down.

"Oh, Archie," she said, as if he were doing her some wicked wrong, "I've just put baby to sleep there. I know he'll wake up if I move him!"

"Baby, Anna? I thought the children were to be kept from those rooms?"

"He does like the new chintz so. Nothing else would quiet him."

"Remove him at once, Anna. At once!"

He generally called her Nan. When he said "Anna" like that, nearly twice in a sentence, she knew there was no appeal.

Very soon her womanly sympathy was enlisted on behalf of the stranger—evidently so lonely, and trembling on the brink of a life that did not seem to have afforded much enjoyment. He lay there on his bed, weak as a little child, swallowing what they gave him, unquestioning, uncomplaining.

In a few days a gentleman named Drummond called on the doctor. He introduced himself as Mr. Peters' family lawyer, and requested to be informed of all the circumstances. Dr. Sherwell was of opinion that anything that would abruptly call the patient back to facts, and set him thinking, would be injurious in his present weak, quiescent

state ; that, as the body gained strength, and the inclination for intercourse showed itself, of course it would be beneficial to recognize friends, but now it would retard recovery. Unless, indeed, there might be peculiar circumstances, such as the power to remove any strain which might have been the cause of the attack. Otherwise, he thought it much better to leave him alone.

Mr. Drummond, however, called to see Mrs. Wright. He left in her hands an ample sum to cover all expenses ; and asking her to do her very best and spare nothing, he gave his address, and said he would call later.

So once more Peters had fallen among good Samaritans.

His first consciousness was of ease and bodily comfort, and kind nature had robbed him of the power to think further. As the light broke gradually on his mind, there was no delirious interval. Lying with his eyes closed, he saw a lovely face that looked

upwards and beyond, and reflected back to his dim consciousness, in some mysterious way, hope and peace, and a strange sense of a great burden lifted from his heart. He did not think ; he only knew. In his limbs there was no power, in his arms no strength, but he was contented, and wanted nothing more. That was the first stage.

Then Mr. Drummond came again. Peters smiled faintly as he moved his long thin fingers to approach a greeting.

“Bad penny, Mr. Drummond,” he said.

His visitor would not let him talk. He told him briefly how he had been made acquainted with the fact of his illness.

“I came again,” he said, “because you are so often in my thoughts. I want you to understand that the tie between our families is not only business. I claim to be your friend. As children, your mother and I were playmates ; as a young man, I lost her ; as an old man, I am faithful to her memory still ; and I wish to ask her son,

for her sake, never again to run the risk from which he has just escaped."

This was the doorway by which Peters re-entered life.

"It's no use finding a good hole," he said. "Somebody always unearths me."

By degrees all the circumstances were related to him as far as they were known to any one there. How he had approached or entered Wimford he was quite unable to recall. His last conscious moment was when he saw his cousin slowly moving away from Stephen's grave. After that all was a blank, until he found himself resting, with a sense of something gained, on the bed in Archibald Wright's apartments, under the pretty chintz canopy from which the poor baby had been ignominiously expelled! A step further, and he recognized what it was he had gained. Whatever he had been guilty of, in consequence of the selfish past, that worst of all haunting sorrows had not fallen to his cousin's share. In her face it was not love and for-

givenness—it was love and *trust*. A holy bond between this world and that other which could never have been, had the blight of deception ever fallen between those two. That had been the heaviest portion of his burden, and he had left it there, in Widbury churchyard.

It was quite a year before he was able to resume his old way of life, and when he did he was to some extent changed.

His self-accusation still remained, and the more he thought of his cousin's face, the more it hurt him to remember the past. Now with that memory there mingled the lightening of that great fear ; but alas ! for himself, a longing and a love he had not realized before.

He began his wanderings to and fro. He would go to Hilton and visit the lonely cottage in the cliff, and spend some time there among the old haunts, looking often, with a weary sense of waiting, across poor Ben's pathway over the sea. At times,

through the summer months, he would wander along the wild Welsh coast, always finding some one to befriend, some kindly acts within his compass to perform. But very seldom did an autumn pass by without taking him again towards that spot where his affections centred ; though never again in Nether Melcombe for the night—sometimes in one neighbouring village, sometimes in another, lingering often for a week or ten days, until once more he had seen his cousin's face. Nor did he again return to his corner of retreat in the porch ; that first involuntary witness of her sacred grief could never knowingly be repeated. But he found a station outside the churchyard enclosure where, standing sheltered by thick cover, close by the trunk of a giant oak, he could watch the length of path across the meadow, and see her sweet calm face as she drew nearer, until the little hand that unbarred the gate was almost within his grasp. Then she would pass from his line of vision for a few

moments, while the air seemed stirred with the breath of prayer, and slowly she would return, fading from his longing gaze, always with new strength and peace in the pure soul that looked out from her beautiful eyes. Only once, in all those years, had he seen her lips quiver or her tears fall. It was the first time she was not alone. She led the child by the hand, and they both carried some simple flowers. The little one chattered as she walked along, until, nearing the gate, she looked up in her mother's face, and said with voice subdued and low, "But father is happy asleep, and his head never aches, and it won't disturb him when Dorie talks. Mammy, does father know it's Dorie's birthday?"

"Yes. I think father always knows about you and me, darling."

"Not other people's. He wouldn't care to, would he?"

The sound of her own voice in that place was strange to Letty; it thrilled the listener

with a pain greater than any physical penance. Then, for the first and only time, he saw the human suffering in her face, so despairing, so silent.

“Now, hush! Dorie,” she said; “remember that is God’s house, and this is His garden. What we love best and dearest is in His hands, and very sacred, and so we should feel as if we were going to pray.”

He heard no more—it was not meant for him; he put his fingers in his ears and closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, a lark was singing up in the blue sky, and two distant figures were disappearing into the park beyond the meadow.

On one occasion, returning from this pilgrimage, he met with an accident. He sprained his foot. A sudden thing, it seemed slight; but it was many a long year before he could again stride about across the country.

Meaton was not far from Bymouth. It

had the usual features of the small places on that coast, and, also, there was excellent fishing in its bay, and in the little river that ran past the town. Here he had elected to remain for the present. His illness had tried him a good deal, and he made himself more comfortable than before, dressing differently, so as to attract less notice in the place where he was compelled to remain. He had his favourite occupation to console him—and found that he had become rather behindhand with the literature of the day. So joined a library and devoured books as he had never done before.

Again the sad column in the *County Chronicle* contained a dear and familiar name. He read it in the morning in his rooms, and without regarding any other news it might contain, put down the paper, and walked to the beach. There he sat well into the day, going over the old scenes, and picturing to himself the blank that would be left in the Hall, and in the village, and—above all—in

that divided life, after all those years of happy union.

There was a boy wandering on the shore without his shoes and socks, picking up seaweeds and filling his pockets with the air of a collector. He was a handsome lad, and Peters had often noticed him before. How would it have been, he thought, if instead of Doris, Letty's child had been a boy? Would the mother have gained equal companionship? And then he remembered another mother and her boy—and thought with a pang that perhaps that life might have been happier and brighter if—— But well he knew that not for worlds would she have changed her lot in this particular. After all, it was the dear old squire who suffered now, and as he grew older that hiatus in the succession, which was unfilled, would surely trouble him. Well, what did one life matter? No son of his would ever take up the *rôle*. It must at last devolve upon a son probably of that little

lady, who was now fast growing into womanhood.

All this time he had been watching the boy coming and going, diving into the rising tide, and leaping back from point to point, as the advancing waves necessitated. At last he stood up, stretched his back straight, and tied his specimens, whatever he had been seeking, in his handkerchief. He sat down on the shingle, and drew on his socks and boots, and fishing out a book from under the stones, where he had evidently placed it for safety, retreated behind the shelter of a rock and disappeared from view. Peters' thinking, had gradually become absorbed in watching, and now a great curiosity moved him to go and see what was the lad's occupation. He was reading, and so engrossed in his book, that he heard no one approaching. Peters bent over to see the title. It was "Robinson Crusoe!" His stick slipped on the shingle, and the boy's dark eyes looked up to meet the handsome thoughtful face.

“Gad! my boy, how I envy you.”

That was their introduction. How many pleasant talks followed it! As for the boy, he had found a companion; and Peters himself became a boy again.

One day it commenced to rain, just as they were deep in some subject of interest, about the live things inhabiting the waters of the seashore. Peters said—

“Come to my rooms.”

The boy blushed.

“I can’t,” he said, “without mother’s leave. I always have to promise. She knows I talk to you, and she knows your name. She won’t mind; but I must ask her first.”

Next day he was beaming.

“Yès, mother says it’s all right, if I don’t stay away too long.” And then he explained. “Father is not strong, and he misses me. Mother is very particular about my not knowing other boys. There’s no school but the High School, and father can’t let me go

away, so I believe very soon I'm to have a tutor."

"A tutor? I think I would make an excellent tutor. Shall I apply?"

It was a grand idea! To the boy, something much too delightful ever to come true; and to Peters himself, so encompassed with difficulties in the accomplishment, that the very fact led him towards it. He certainly could not see Mrs. Barton on the subject; she never received visitors. Mr. Barton likewise led a secluded life, and he could hardly open negotiations through the boy himself.

Nothing daunted, he turned the matter over in his mind, and with a good result. He obtained a letter from Mr. Drummond, in which he was described as a gentleman of good family, having had a university education, and wanting to obtain a post of this kind, more to occupy his leisure in a pleasant manner, than from any wish to turn his talents to profit. Armed with this, he bearded the rector of Meaton in his own study, and

carried the place by assault ! In his gratitude he took a sitting in the church, and put down his name for several charities. He had now become quite a character in Meaton society, and many attempts were made to draw him out of his shell, but without success. At last it became generally admitted that he was very eccentric—delighting only in his own society or the companionship of boys.

Once or twice he had seen Mr. and Mrs. Barton, and his heart ached for the lad in so sad and dull a home. The poor father, feeble and helpless—taken out for his short drive every day—living in the midst of luxuries without the power to appreciate them. He articulated with difficulty, and could only be understood by those accustomed to him.

“Poor father !” the boy would say, “he wasn’t always like that ; he used to talk and laugh, and play with me when I was a little chap, and tell me all the things he used to do ; he must have been very strong once—

but I think it's quite the hardest for mother to watch him getting worse."

And certainly all Mrs. Barton's energies were concentrated in that one direction. All round the boy, in his rooms, and respecting his fancies, were signs of motherly care and thoughtfulness. But there never seemed to be tenderness in her voice, or caressing in her manner when she spoke to him ; and the earnestness with which he anticipated her wishes, the humility with which he accepted his position, his uncomplaining effort to make excuses for her, was all a very unusual aspect of a family interior.

To brighten and change this sad young life was now the duty that Peters had taken up, and in it he found a strange comfort and content.

END OF VOL. II.



